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Author's Note

Welcome to my story! I won't go on for too long, but I just want to make sure everybody knows that I only have right to the characters and the story line, everything else belongs to the Erin Hunter team.

Please don't copy my main characters, I doubt any of you will, but I just want to make sure. It's only the MCs that I really care about, and Boulderclaw and Goldenpool, because they are based off cats I actually know and I don't want to see them written differently than how I display them. Sorry for saying that, I just kinda want to make sure, because the real Boulderclaw has joined StarClan (Rest In Peace Sasha) and he's really close to my heart :{

I'm also trying as hard as I possibly can to not do any cliches in this book, so if you see one, I'll try to fix it, along with any grammar mistakes! Just let me know, and even tell me some cliches if you want to so I can make sure not to make my story predictable. I already know you won't see the end coming!

Oh, and, I forgot to say hey to any of the people who read the chapters of the first draft of Clouded Skies, which is *VERY* different to this one. If not for some of the names, it could be seen as a completely different story, since you guys didn't know the complete plot. I hope this one stays up because I really like it. The Clans are my own, and you'll even get to know the history!

EDIT: I'm currently near the end of the fourth book of this series, but I decided to rewrite the story and will no longer update for this storyline, but I will keep the books up to be read

Allegiances

When I have a cat with the description such as "white lower half", that means their stomach, legs, and paws are all white.

EchoClan

Normal body shape: long sturdy legs, long tails, large flat paws, curled claws, hard pads, short body length, broad flanks, large chest

Leader:

Acornstar- copper she-cat with amber-brown eyes

Deputy:

Eagleclaw- light brown she-cat with lighter belly, chest, paws, and muzzle, apprentice Petalpaw

Medicine Cat:

Mossrain- small gray tom with hazel eyes, has a white patch over one ear and eye

Warriors:

Maskdapple- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with a black patch over her eyes and muzzle, has green eyes, apprentice Blossompaw

Oakcloud- handsome brown tabby tom with brown eyes, apprentice Brightpaw

Boulderclaw- large thick-furred gray tom with white lower half, tail tip, chest, throat, and muzzle, has brilliant shining green eyes, apprentice Firepaw

Grayblaze- large gray tom with yellow eyes

Frostfall- thick-furred white she-cat with blue eyes, deaf in one ear

Silverstrike- silver tom with white lower half, chest, throat, and muzzle, has blue eyes

Foxpounce- red tabby tom with yellow eyes

Russetdawn- ginger-brown she-cat with amber eyes, apprentice Flamepaw

Stonecoat- large gray tom with green eyes

Shadefur- large gray tom with green eyes

Pebblepeak- gray tabby tom with white front paws, has yellow eyes

Thorntail- brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Brightpaw- tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with blue-green eyes, mentor Oakcloud

Petalpaw- tortoiseshell-and-white tom with green eyes, mentor Eagleclaw

Flamepaw- fiery tabby tom with dark amber eyes, mentor Russetdawn

Featherpaw- dark fiery tabby she-cat with bright amber eyes, mentor Maskdapple

Firepaw- dark fiery red-brown tom with yellow eyes, mentor Boulderclaw

Queens:

Snowfern- small lithe white she-cat with black face, tail, legs, and ears, has icy blue-green eyes, mother of Blossomkit, Willowkit, Jaykit, and Ravenkit

Goldenpool- large dark golden tabby she-cat with golden eyes

Kits:

Blossomkit- thick-furred small white she-cat with silver back and top of head, has light green eyes

Willowkit- lithe white she-cat with black legs, ears, face, and tail, has large ice-blue eyes

Jaykit- thick-furred white tom with pale gray lower legs, ears, face, and tail, has pale green eyes

Ravenkit- lithe black tom with large owl-like yellow eyes with a lean face and muzzle

Elders:

Dappletail- dull tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with dull gray-green eyes

Berrywhisker - Silver tabby she-cat with amber eyes.

BatClan

Normal body shape: large chests, broad shoulders, short legs, thick paws, webbed toes, sleek short fur, small ears, large eyes

Leader:

Dawnstar- pretty tan tabby she-cat with pale amber eyes

Deputy:

Clovertail- light brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Medicine Cat:

Sandflight- tan she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Brackenfoot- almost-black brown tom with dark brown eyes

Brownear- brown tom with brown eyes, missing one complete ear

Leafpelt- black she-cat with bushy fur and green eyes, apprentice

Carppaw

Bloomcloud- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Juniperfur- tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Duskfang– White tom with green eyes, apprentice Frondpaw

Heronclaw- white tom with yellow eyes, apprentice Blazepaw

Emberheart- light ginger she-cat with yellow eyes, apprentice Ratpaw

Hazelfur – Light brown she-cat with hazel eyes

Birchsplash- white tom with large black blotches and yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Ratpaw- solid brown tom with bright amber eyes, mentor Emberheart

Blazepaw- brown tom with brown eyes, mentor Heronclaw

Carppaw- brown tom with green eyes, mentor Leafpelt

Frondpaw- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes, mentor Duskfang

Queens:

Ashbreeze- speckled gray she-cat with white lower half, has blue eyes, mother of Bluekit, Bramblekit, and Breamkit

Kits:

Bluekit- blue-gray she-kit with white lower half and blue eyes

Bramblekit- dark brown tomkit with brown eyes

Breamkit- light brown tomkit with brown eyes

Elders:

Lakeshine- small silver tabby she-cat with light gray eyes and white belly, paws, chest, muzzle, and tail tip

SageClan

Normal body shape: short dense fur, large ears, long thin legs, small paws, lithe body, thin flanks, small chest

Leader:

Robinstar- small tom with cream-colored fur, white lower half and yellow eyes

Deputy:

Dewnose- black she-cat with brown eyes

Medicine Cat:

Poppysong- tan-brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Cindershade- blue-gray she-cat with green eyes

Brookfern- thick-furred brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Briarcloud- thick-furred light brown she-cat with lighter front paws and yellow eyes

Haretail- stubby-legged brown she-cat with stubby tail and lighter paws and muzzle, has brown eyes

Cloudleap- white she-cat with amber eyes

Gorsedust- gray tabby tom with brown eyes

Amberbreeze- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Sorrelfoot- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with green eyes

Flutteringfire- mostly-white tortoiseshell with green eyes

Pouncefoot- dark ginger tom with dark amber eyes

Swiftrunner- white tom with large black patches and yellow eyes

Squirrelleap- red-brown she-cat with green eyes

Pikefrost – Ginger tabby tom with blue eyes

Bumbleflight - Black tom with one white paw and hazel eyes

Ivypelt - Cream she-cat with a white muzzle and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Sparrowpaw – White tabby tom with gray eyes

Lightningpaw - Long-haired golden tabby tom with green eyes

Lilypaw - Light gray she-cat with darker grey patches and blue eyes

Queens:

Shadowmist - Black she-cat with pale yellow eyes, mother of Barkkit and Icekit

Hailsong – White tabby she-cat with light gray spots and hazel eyes

Kits:

Barkkit - Black tom with a brown underbelly/paws and yellow eyes

Icekit - White she-cat with light brown patches (small) and amber eyes

Elders:

Weaselclaw- short-legged gray tom with clouding green eyes

Hollypatch- fading tortoiseshell and white she-cat with blue eyes

CrowClan

Normal body shape: small bodies, short necks, short legs, dense thick

fur, large claws, large teeth

Leader:

Whitestar- white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy:

Roseclaw- russet she-cat with amber eyes

Medicine Cat:

Hawkstream- ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Sedgeflower- tawny she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Heatherpool- ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Larkfur- gray tabby tom with green eyes

Alderfern- brown tom with brown eyes

Rushfur- light brown tom with light brown eyes

Reedtail- long-tailed brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Thrushflight – Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

Nightspark – Black tom with a white muzzle, chest, has yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Sunpaw- golden-brown tabby tom with golden eyes

Leopardpaw- pretty tan she-cat with darker blotches, has yellow eyes

Queens:

Cedarbreeze- ginger she-cat with amber eyes, kits are Oakkit and

Daisykit, mate is Nightspark

Fawnriver- light brown she-cat with long thick tail and white lower legs, muzzle, inside ears, tail tip, belly, and muzzle, hazel eyes

Kits:

Oakkit- ginger tom with amber eyes

Daisykit- black she-cat with white chest and amber eyes

Elders:

Splashtail- gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Prologue

The wind whispered through thick reeds along the side of a smooth-flowing river, the water trickling over small stones. The current was disrupted by a cat stepping into the cool current, her white front paws setting easily over the slick rocks.

She looked around, her bright green eyes curious and glowing, her black-striped silver coat glowing like a whole sky of stars were twined into her short transparent pelt. She crossed the river quietly, her tail tip flicking the water and sending a few droplets plopping farther down the river.

"Let's see what we have," her mew was smooth and young, but deep with the wisdom of many, many moons. She stepped from the water and into the reeds, slipping through them with ease, emerging from the other side and being alighted by the full moon's shine.

She looked up, staring at the powerful Star Streak, the thick pelt of stars lighting the sky. She remembered her mother's stories, of how she bonded with her mate—the silver tabby's father—when they first met.

'Anytime I see the Star Streak, I will remember him; all I can see is his glowing eyes," *she had said on dark nights when he was away hunting, or...after.*

"Echo?" A voice spoke in front of her, and the she-cat raised her head to see another cat standing in the area she was going towards, a small clearing with a strange swirling pool of mist floating right above the lush grass.

The cat who had spoken was a dark gray tabby she-cat, with powerful broad shoulders and thick muscles. Dovestar, a previous leader of Echo's Clan. "Nice to see you again, it's been awhile." Echo dipped her head and approached the other cat, flicking her gaze to the swirling mist, and she saw what she was coming to look for.

In the mist a smooth image was settling; it was of a thin-bodied white she-cat with black legs, face, and tail, and she had four kits curled

against her flank. Two looked just like her, with one a she-cat with white and black, and the second a tom, white and pale gray. The other she-kit was mostly white, but her head and back were a glowing silver, much like Echo's own fur. The last kit, the smallest, was a tom, with jet black fur and long legs that spread out in the moss, his long tail draped over his brother's muzzle.

"I see you are looking in on them as well?" Echo looked over at Dovestar, but the she-cat wasn't speaking. Instead, she was staring at Echo with hard blue eyes, her white chest fur puffed.

"What are you doing here, Echo?" She let a small growl escape her throat. "You only come when a leader dies or to give them lives. And I don't see Acornstar dying with six lives still left!" Her whiskers quivered as she shook out her back fur, trying to force it back down, for it had begun to bristle.

Echo didn't answer, but instead just stared at the she-cat, with light surprise in her green gaze. Then, she turned and looked, not towards the mist, but at a dense forest in the other direction, across the stream.

"Do you remember the stories of me, Dovestar?" she asked softly.

"I don't see what that has to do with any of this!" The dark gray tabby stalked forward and stared challenging into Echo's calm gaze, with slight fear whispering through her own blue eyes.

"Just answer the question," Echo responded softly.

Dovestar let out a soft annoyed growl, then meowed stiffly, "yes, I do."

"Really?" Echo turned to look at her, her eyes still soft and calm and wise. "Then why do you question the actions of the creator of your Clan? The one who made all this possible?" She flicked her tail around the clearing.

Dovestar's eyes flashed. "In those stories, you were never told to be arrogant!"

There was a yowl of anger, deep and powerful, and Dovestar was suddenly barreled over by a flash of brown fur. After a few rolls in the grass, the she-cat was pinned by a muscular dark tom, with yellow eyes

glaring.

"Branchstar! Get off!" The she-cat struggled to get free, while Echo just sat and wrapped her tail around her paws.

"How dare you!" the tom hissed, his lips curling. "Echo is not arrogant! She is treated with respect! Don't you ever dare speak like that in front of her!"

"Branchstar, smooth your fur." Echo stood and gave her shoulder a lick, then slowly approached, while the brown tom quickly leaped away.

"I'm sorry, but I can't let any *cat speak to you that way, even my own deputy." His eyes focused on Dovestar accusingly. "I thought I trained her better."*

"Branchstar." Echo blinked softly, and the tom dropped his gaze and stepped back, licking his chest fur. The silver tabby looked back at the she-cat who was struggling to her paws, her fur on end. "Dovestar, I understand your need to call me arrogant, but now is not the time to act as such."

Dovestar curled her lips but said nothing, so Echo continued.

"I am busy, Dovestar, even in death, and I cannot stop to have pointless conversations. I came because this is important to the Clans, an old enemy is returning." The tabby turned and walked back to the misty image. "He has the right personality for the job, to help us." Her eyes focused on one of the kits curled at their mother's belly

"How can a little kit help?" Dovestar approached, her tone not angry anymore, but curious and slightly worried.

"When the time comes, he won't be a little kit. Hopefully, he will learn everything I can teach him before anything happens. I don't know when they will come, but hopefully not for a while...These kits still have many moons before they can even be apprenticed." Echo sighed and blinked softly.

Both Dovestar and Branchstar were silent, but the brown tom managed to speak in his raspy, broken voice that he had been born with. "What do you mean, 'everything I can teach him'?"

"You will find out when the time is right," Echo responded immediately, without even a hesitation. "He can't start his training until he becomes an apprentice, so hopefully I will have enough time. If not..." The she-cat turned to look at both the cats. "I will have to take matters into my own paws."

And I can't do that if I'm dead*, the she-cat added silently. If only she had her own ancestors to pray to for guidance and luck.*

Welcome to my book and I hoped you enjoyed the Prologue! Comment what you think and if I made any mistakes. Also, at the end of every chapter, there will be an ATC(Ask the Comments) and you guys can give me your best guesses/ answers! I already have the story planned out, but I really want to know what you guys and gals are thinking! And, if you want, ask me some questions, and I'll answer them as soon as I can!

Question: What do you think Echo is planning?

Chapter One

Ravenkit was awoken by the shuffling of moss by his ear, and he flicked open his large pale yellow eyes to find his vision blocked by fuzzy white fur. Shaking his head, he brought it back until he could see clearly, his neck aching from the awkward position. Jaykit, his brother, was turned onto his back, his belly facing up towards the top of the den. His body was curled slightly, with his pale gray head twisted until his cheek was almost touching his shoulder, with his tail lying across his stomach.

Ravenkit turned his head around, looking at the large warm shape behind him, and saw his mother was also still sleeping, with him pressed against her flank, while his two sisters were curled up in front of him. Willowkit was quite close, and he stretched his head forward to rest it on her haunches, letting out a small yawn.

Why did I wake up before everyone else? He thought to himself, grumpy. He tried to fall back into sleep, remembering the nice dream of a pretty forest and stream with strange exciting smells, but he couldn't sit still. Sighing, he raised himself to his paws and gave his head a shake, yawning once again.

As his jaws closed, he flicked his tongue over his lips, his whiskers twitching as he noticed that Goldenpool wasn't in the nursery. She was going to be kitting very soon--it should've happened a few sunrises ago--but yet she wasn't resting, like Mossrain had told her to do the day before.

'Mossrain, I know what I'm doing, stop harassing me,' the tough she-cat had said as she ate a pigeon.

Well, I guess it's true, he thought to the memory, and, standing up from the nest, shook the sleep from his legs, then stepped carefully over his brother, raising his tail high to make sure he didn't wake him. He didn't really want to deal with Jaykit, now that he thought about it. He was a little too crazy. But, at least he wasn't like Blossomkit.

Ravenkit cast a gaze at his sister, the silver on her back and head glowing white with pale sunlight shining through the camp entrance. He gave his paw a lick and drew it over his ear, ignoring the slight pain in his chest as he thought of his sister, then tottered forward, still feeling quite tired from his long sleep. He had gone to the nest when the sun was still lowering through the sky, and now he had overslept and felt dizzy.

When he padded out into the clearing, he was immediately blinded by the bright sun, and he shut his eyes quickly to stop the burning. When he was sure it was safe, he slowly opened his eyes again but squinted them for a few moments until the brightness dulled. The kit's black pelt glowed silver in the light.

"You're up early, Ravenkit."

The tomkit turned around to see the warrior Oakcloud walking up, his brown tabby fur glowing in the leaf-fall sunlight. "Hi, Oakcloud!" he mewed brightly. He had always liked the senior warrior; the large tom was quiet and smart and serious, but he had always played with Ravenkit and his littermates when he had free time. Especially since Goldenpool moved to the nursery.

"Is Goldenpool still sleeping?" The tom flicked his ear at the nursery entrance, and Ravenkit noticed a plump mouse at his paws. It was probably for the golden tabby.

"No, she's not in there." Ravenkit looked uncertainly towards the nursery entrance, slightly worried that the golden she-cat had maybe gotten hurt or ventured out alone. What if she started kitting out in the forest or on the moor, with no one around to help her? He looked back at the brown tom and saw, not fear, but amusement, shining in his brown gaze.

The tom snorted, his whiskers twitching. "She probably went to the medicine cat's den, the worry mouse." He looked across the clearing to the small cave entrance on the side of the tall cliffside mountain. He looked back down at the kit. "Would you take this mouse to her? I have to head out on a patrol," he meowed.

"Of course!" Ravenkit gave a little jump. He loved visiting the

medicine cat's den; he enjoyed the wonderful and mysterious smells of the herbs. Oakcloud dipped his head, gave the kit's forehead a touch with his nose, then he turned and bounded off. Ravenkit watched him for a moment, then picked up the mouse, adjusting his teeth on its warm fur, then he waddled forward awkwardly towards the den.

He crossed the clearing quite easily, but he started slipping on the wet grass as he went past the pool of water in the middle back of the camp. The waterfall created a heavy mist that sprayed lightly at his fur, but the grass and soil were creating small mud puddles now that the pool was widening as the weather got cooler, allowing more water to wash down into the camp.

Soon, he was past the pool and hurried along his way, shaking out his small paws to clear away the mud. His mood piped up as he entered the dark medicine cat's den entrance, shivering as the thin air slipped through his coat. The scents of herbs and leaves filled his nose, overpowering the mouse's blood-sweet smell.

"Ravenkit? What are you doing awake at this time?" He turned his head to see the young tom Mossrain sitting near a small pool of water, his gray tail curled over his paws, which were stained with herb residue.

He dropped the mouse to the ground, licking the blood from his lips, and his belly growled. "Oakcloud brought this mouse for Goldenpool. She wasn't in the nursery, so he thought she may be here."

Mossrain gave a playful snort, his white ear twitching. "She's off in the other part of the den, gathering cobwebs from the corners. After Russetdawn scratched her pad we've been needing some more. That she-cat is too proud, waiting so long her wound almost got infected, you know. But she's doing better, almost healed, and she's already back on patrols."

"That's good." Ravenkit's tail twitched in amusement. All of the memories he had of Mossrain were mostly filled with the gray tom talking. He was nice, really nice, and caring, but he found it hard to stop talking some... Okay, all the time. He never knew when to

stop, and he often got off track.

"Yes, isn't it?" Mossrain's eyes glowed. "She's doing very well, and she and Foxpounce have been getting along really nicely. Sure, they have three kits in early apprenticeship, but I think they'll wait until after leaf-bare, and more future warriors are always good to have. I'm sure Featherpaw and her brothers will become great warriors for the Clan, she's already a pretty good hunter, even though she's only in her second moon of training, and her brothers aren't bad either."

The tom finally quieted and turned to the herbs that were stored in small crannies and crevices in the side of the rocky wall. Ravenkit left the mouse and padded over, opening in his mouth to take in all the scents. Some were soft, some were dull, while others were sour, sharp, or sweet. His nose brought him to one, in particular; a small pile of a leafy plant with a wonderful, delicious smell.

"What is this?" Ravenkit asked, tilting his head. He was already addicted to the scent, and it made his head fuzzy.

"Oh, that's catmint," Mossrain mewed cheerily, pawing the leaves together with his paw then picking it up and pushing it into a small crevice. "It's really helpful with whitecough and greencough, but hawkweed is also pretty good; it doesn't grow on our territory, though, so Poppysong said she'll give us some for this leaf-bare since they have a lot."

"Who's Poppysong?" Ravenkit cut in before the tom continued on and the mysterious cat was lost in the background.

"Poppysong is SageClan's medicine cat. She's really nice, and we're really good friends. When you go to your first Gathering, come to find me and I'll introduce you," the tom meowed, then started on how interesting the SageClan hunting tactics were.

But Ravenkit was lost in thought about the Gathering. He might go to the next one, in almost a moon's time, since he was getting apprenticed any day now. But he knew cats from all four Clans would be there, and it seemed a little scary to think about all those powerful strangers walking around. He shivered as a chill ran up his

spine, and his heart twisted in fear of meeting all those different cats.

"...Isn't that cool? SageClan and us, we have that in common, using tunnels. Sure, they use theirs for hunting, and we use ours for getting around quickly on cold days, but we still use the same methods. It's nice, isn't it? That we're from different histories, but yet somehow still close," Mossrain's voice cut in.

"Uh, yeah," Ravenkit muttered, giving his head a shake in an attempt to clear his mind. He focused on the herbs that lay in front of them, using the mingling smells to calm his head. "Um, what's this herb?" He prodded a sweet-smelling plant with large leaves and small white flowers, along with some dirty roots attached to the bottom.

"Oh, that's chervil. The leaves help cure infection while the roots help with a bellyache. It's a very useful plant, I used it with Russetdawn, to keep her pad from possibly getting an infection. Cut off the snake's head before it strikes, right? There are more herbs that help with infection, like burdock root, dried oak leaves, marigold, the all sorts." The tom shrugged as he continued through the piles.

"So, what are you doing?" Ravenkit shifted on his paws, trying to get comfortable on the cold stone ground.

"I'm looking through the herb storage to make sure we have what we need for when the snow comes. It's pretty far away, leaf-bare doesn't start for about two moons, but we'll need to keep our stores high so they don't run out by the time the frost comes. They will lose some of their power when they get cold, but it's better than not having anything," Mossrain explained.

"I guess that makes sense," Ravenkit murmured, blinking at the tom's small paws as he dragged the last pile of leaves into his claws before storing them in a small nook. "Hey, Mossrain, do you like being a medicine cat? Do you ever wish you were a warrior?" he questioned.

"Oh, not for a second," the tom replied immediately, turning his

hazel eyes to look at the young kit, suddenly looking serious. "Since the moment I could walk I knew I wanted to become a medicine cat. Goldenpool was glad to take me on, she had been waiting for an apprentice so she could have kits, once I finished my training, of course."

Ravenkit nodded. From the stories he'd heard, Goldenpool had always wanted to be a medicine cat but wanted to have a mate. That was allowed, of course, but only if she had a fully-trained apprentice. Her first apprentice--Ravenkit couldn't remember the name--had died before she got her full name, and Goldenpool didn't find a new apprentice until Mossrain had been born, and that wasn't even too long ago.

"Is she gonna come back to being a medicine cat after her kits become apprentices?" the black tomkit asked hesitantly. Even though medicine cats could have kits, they were always allowed back into their position afterward, and that meant there wasn't an open place for another medicine cat. Or, more correctly, a medicine cat apprentice.

"Most definitely," Mossrain answered, puffing out his chest, then caught the flash of sadness in Ravenkit's eyes, and crouched down, sighing. "I'm guessing you wanted to become a medicine cat?" he wondered.

Ravenkit's mew caught in his throat, so he gave a little nod. Ever since he was a little tiny kit and his littermates were pretending to catch prey with their meals, he had hated the thought of killing little creatures, taking their lives for his own. It was for survival, but it was still taking a life. Any cat that had hunted was a killer, just not in the same way as others.

"I'm sorry to have crushed your dreams," he sighed again. "I often speak before I think, as you can probably tell. You still have a chance at becoming a medicine cat, maybe. If you truly, *truly* want to follow this path, you could talk to Acornstar, and she may allow it. A Clan leader's word is the warrior code, so it wouldn't be breaking it."

"I think that's a great idea, Mossrain."

A voice spoke behind them, and while Mossrain slowly turned his eyes towards the speaker, Ravenkit jumped with his fur bushed and his claws unsheathed. But, it turned out to only be Goldenpool, tottering towards the mouse with her bulging belly swinging under her.

"Really?" Mossrain's eyes lit up like a kit's, and Ravenkit reminded himself that Mossrain was barely even an adult tom. His littermate, Pebblepeak, was still a new warrior, after all.

"I've spent the last moon in the nursery with you, Ravenkit, and I can tell how you are different than your littermates. A good different," she added, as his eyes flashed with fear. "You are a very caring cat, and I know you would be a much better medicine cat than a warrior." Her golden eyes blinked kindly.

"Acornstar planned the naming ceremony for tomorrow, so we might want to go to her now." Mossrain stood up and shook his fur.

"Tomorrow?" Ravenkit looked at him quickly in surprise. He knew it was soon, but tomorrow? That was so close! Fear tightened his heart and his breath started to shorten, making it hard to breathe. He tried to speak, but he couldn't.

"Ravenkit, are you okay?" Goldenpool looked at him, her face becoming a little blurry, but Ravenkit managed to take a deep breath, close his eyes, and calm himself.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he whispered, licking his muzzle to wet his drying throat. Goldenpool stared at him for a moment longer, than shook her coat.

"As long as you say so. We can go to speak to Acornstar now if you'd like since I bet your littermates are still sleeping. Do you want one of us to come with you, or do you want to go alone?" Goldenpool looked at him softly and patiently, her tail flicking calmly.

"Um, with one of you, I think, maybe," Ravenkit stuttered, his meow becoming hoarse again. He was getting nervous, this wasn't his plan for the day! It had started so normally, so quiet, but now it was just

so nerve-racking, going so quick he felt like his head was going to explode.

"Mossrain, do you want to go?" Goldenpool looked at her old apprentice.

"Um, maybe all three of us should go? So we can all speak our minds, and we have some, like, I don't know, not leverage, but, you know, power, but not..." Mossrain seemed flustered for once.

Goldenpool let out a purr of amusement. "You sound like your old self, Mossrain," she meowed, then looked at Ravenkit and whispered, "He was a lot like you, could barely speak a word when he was a kit. Was always confused or scared, but, as you can see-" She cast her mischievous gaze up to her apprentice, "-he doesn't have that problem now."

Ravenkit couldn't help but feel slightly joyed by her playfulness, and he felt a bit of courage rise in his soft muscles. He gave a quick nod. "I guess we should go now, right? So that, I don't know, I guess we could go whenever." He started feeling embarrassed by both the cats looking at him, and he scratched his claws over the stone.

Mossrain comforted him by pressing his side against Ravenkit's, then padded out of the den, quickly followed by the older medicine cat, and the kit slipped after them. The clearing's light wasn't as bad, now, but it still stung a little, though they quickly made their way towards the pool of water.

The medicine cats waited for him to catch up by the pool's edge, then Mossrain led the way by leaping over the water onto a stepping stone, then to the next, and to the next, until he leaped right by the rushing water and into a hidden cave behind. Goldenpool allowed Ravenkit to go first, and he was lucky because of it.

The stones were a little slippery, and he made the first one well, but as he landed on the second his paw fell from under him and his haunches threatened to fall into the water. It wasn't deep, only as high as the middle of his legs, but it was still very cold and it would take a long while before he dried up again. He heard claws next to

him, and teeth gripped his scruff and helped him get steady.

He looked over to see Goldenpool standing next to him, and she nodded forward, allowing him to jump to the third stone, then to safety by Mossrain. His pelt was slick from the mist, which had coated over and was causing his fur to start dripping. Soon, Goldenpool made it over to them, and they all together padded forward farther into the cave.

"Did I forget a meeting?" Acornstar's soft meow sounded, and she stepped free from the shadows, her amber-brown pelt dull in the darkness. "I don't remember the last time both the medicine cats came to me without a warning beforehand, and I don't think a kit has ever been involved." The she-cat's eyes flickered to Ravenkit, and he felt his pelt grow so hot that he thought his fur should've dried.

"We were just talking about something and we wanted your opinion." Goldenpool sat heavily down on her haunches, her belly bulging. "Ravenkit came to us and expressed his want to become a medicine cat. Mossrain and I both agree that he would make a wonderful healer one day, and so we wanted to come to you to ask if you would allow him to train under both of us, for him to have two mentors."

Goldenpool didn't even hesitate with her speech, staring at Acornstar, not in a challenging way, but a strong, respectful way. The leader stared at her silently with unreadable amber-brown eyes, and looked at all three of them, blinking calmly. And, after what felt like moons and moons and moons, she spoke.

"How do you plan to make this work with leaf-bare coming up? We might have sick cats and we can't focus on training if lives are at danger," she meowed, and Goldenpool quickly put a paw in front of Mossrain's muzzle, since he had opened his muzzle to speak, but it was clear the golden tabby didn't want to deal with his endless mewing.

"I will be having my kits, so Mossrain will get to train Ravenkit for almost his whole apprenticeship since I'll be in the nursery for six moons. And, if Mossrain needs some time alone to help hurt cats or

he doesn't want Ravenkit to get involved yet, he can come into the nursery and while I take care of my kits, I can talk to him about herbs and handle other parts of his training," the she-cat meowed.

Mossrain nodded quickly, accepting the plan, but decided not to speak. Acornstar looked at Ravenkit. "Are you okay with this? You'll be separated from your Clanmates if you follow this path. You won't participate in battles or patrols, and you will be relied on one day to take care of the Clan with your knowledge, without any guidance except from your ancestors. Do you want this to be your life?"

The she-cat gaze bore into his. Ravenkit's pelt was itching, his chest was clamping, and fear was crawling up his throat like a spider on a web, creeping towards its prey. It was getting closer and closer and the kit knew he couldn't let it snap. Taking a deep breath, Ravenkit calmed his mind, looked at his leader, and meowed, "Yes. I want to become the next medicine cat of EchoClan."

I know! It was probably horrible, right? But I tried to stay away from cliches; Ravenkit wanted to become a medicine cat, which most cliches the cat doesn't. But it still sounds pretty cliche...y. Oops.

Question #1: What do you think about Ravenkit's choice?

Question #2: Do you think Mossrain will ever stop talking?

Chapter Two

Ravenkit couldn't sit still.

He was right outside the nursery, lined up with his littermates, watching as the Clan mingled around, murmuring to each other, enjoying morning prey or sharing tongues. Jaykit was also shifting, while Blossomkit was just sitting with her chest puffed, light green eyes shining.

"We're gonna be the best apprentices ever, you know," she told them smugly. "All of us training together, learning to fight and hunt together--we'll be unstoppable." Her tail flicked.

Ravenkit gave a numb nod, his mind elsewhere. He hadn't told his littermates that he was becoming a medicine cat yet, nor his father, though his mother did know, he had confided in her. He didn't know if he would lose his sisters and brother when they found out he wouldn't be training with them or sharing a den with them, and it scared him.

What will happen after I get my new name? He wondered. But, he didn't get the chance to think anymore about it.

"Will all cats able to hunt for their Clan come to me for a Clan meeting!" Acornstar's call rang through the cool air, her brownish-ginger coat flashing as she leaped onto the pile of rocks that sat in between the medicine cat's den and her own den, putting her in a position so she could see all her cats.

"It's almost time!" Willowkit squeaked and quickly began brushing down her side fur, and Snowfern purred in satisfaction, while Blossomkit let out a *mrrow* of amusement and disrespect.

"Oh, it's not gonna matter! You'll fluff it out soon!" The she-kit gave her short white fur a heavy shake, allowing it to ruffle up. Ravenkit looked at his mother, and he saw in her eyes that she clearly disapproved, but she had given up long ago to keep Blossomkit

under control. She was too tiresome to always deal with.

"Be respectful, Blossomkit," Snowfern hissed under her breath as the Clan finished gathering in front of their leader.

"Will Snowfern and her litter approach?" Acornstar called, and the graceful white and black queen stood up and headed forward, her four kits following. Ravenkit walked calmly beside his mother, Jaykit was next to him with a puffed out chest, and Willowkit was bouncing excitedly next to him. Blossomkit had already raced ahead and was pacing impatiently near Acornstar's rock.

The Clan stared at her with narrowed eyes, clearly disrupted by her... "enthusiasm," but she seemed not to notice. Boulderclaw, their father, stepped towards her and blocked her way, leaning down to whisper in her ear. Ravenkit strained to hear as they stopped next to them, but his father had stopped talking. Blossomkit seemed irritated, lashing her tail, but stood near her mother silently, her eyes hard.

"Thank you all for gathering," Acornstar called, dipping her head, though her amber-brown eyes didn't move from Blossomkit's frame. "Blossomkit, Willowkit, Jaykit, and Ravenkit, you all have gone through six moons of your life, and it is time for you to gain your new names."

Jaykit stood tall, Blossomkit's eyes sparkled, Willowkit flicked her tail, while Ravenkit swallowed, trying to calm his racing heart. Was he still going to apprenticed to Mossrain?

"Blossomkit, you will now be named Blossompaw; Jaykit, you will be Jaypaw; Willowkit, you will be Willowpaw; and Ravenkit, you will be Ravenpaw." She dipped her head to each of them in turn. "Maskdapple!" Acornstar called into the crowd.

After a moment, the pretty senior warrior emerged, her tortoiseshell-and-white coat glowing, and the sun bounced off the black mask on her eyes and muzzle that gave her her name. She walked with grace, her green eyes powerful and calm. Ravenpaw watched the muscles as they rippled under her short pelt, with her thick sturdy legs looking like she could jump up the side of the cliff

that made the back of their camp.

"Maskdapple, you are a smart and patient warrior, and I believe you will be a great mentor to young Blossompaw. Teach her all you know, and I'm sure all of us will be proud of the cat she becomes." Acornstar's eyes glowed.

The newly named Blossompaw seemed slightly annoyed for her choice of mentor, and Ravenpaw--he actually had his apprentice name!--wasn't too surprised. Maskdapple was a patient cat, but she was also very forthright and would be a good match for his crazy sister. The two cats stepped towards each other and softly touched their noses, then stepped back closer to the crowd. Blossompaw held her tail high like she had already been given her warrior name.

Next was Jaypaw, and with his eyes glowing with courage he received the red tabby Foxpouce for a mentor, while Willowkit was awarded the young gray tabby Pebblepeak. And now, Ravenpaw stood alone in front of his leader, with every single cat in the Clan staring at him, their gazes burning into his dark coat.

Acornstar didn't speak, but instead, Mossrain walked forward, and Ravenpaw went weak with relief. The Clan murmured together, and the young tomkit couldn't turn to look at his littermates, older brothers, or his father. Stonecoat and Shadefur, his older brothers, what would they think? Would they care about his decision?

"Cats of EchoClan," Mossrain began, "As you all know, I am still very, *very* young. But with leaf-bare coming and so many cats and your other medicine cat nursing, I will need more help. And young Ravenpaw has expressed his wanting to follow the same path Goldenpool and I did. So, I will ask again. Ravenpaw, is it your wish to delve into the mysteries of becoming a medicine cat, to treat the ill and heal the wounded?"

"Yes." He didn't even pause. He wasn't scared right now. He didn't want to hesitate, he wanted this, to become Mossrain's apprentice and help his Clan. This was what he was supposed to do. Mossrain walked forward and leaned down, touching Ravenpaw's black nose, and Acornstar stepped forward.

"Ravenpaw, at the half-moon, you and Mossrain will travel to the Star Cave and speak to StarClan through the Moonstream in front of the other medicine cats to receive their blessing in your new path." Acornstar dipped her head. "Remember on that day that all the good hopes and wishes are with you from your Clanmates of EchoClan."

As Acornstar dipped her head down to the four new apprentices, the Clan raised their voices into congratulation, whether shouting their names or yowling acceptance, the noise rushed over the stone and amplified into Ravenpaw's ears. He flattened them as his older brothers slipped their way through the group, which had moved forward to greet the new apprentices.

Stonecoat raised one large flat front paw and scuffed the fur on his younger brother's head. "Can't wait for the day you'll be patching us up!" he laughed.

Shadefur, with the identical eyes and pelt of his brother, gave a snort of laughter, speaking in the same amused tone as his littermate. "Well, with you tripping over every bramble we meet, I'm sure it'll be often!"

Ravenpaw heard a loud purr and looked over to see that his father was approaching, with Snowfern against his side and Willowpaw and Jaypaw following. "I'm sure you'll do amazing, Ravenpaw." Boulderclaw leaned down his head and touched noses with him, and an excited quiver went through his body. His father, the amazing wise warrior, accepted his decision!

"I guess it'll be fine," Jaypaw muttered, watching his paws as his claws scrapped through the earth, and Snowfern let out an amused purr.

"Jaypaw, you have both your sisters to train with." She gave his forehead a lick. "And I'm sure Ravenpaw will have plenty of time to visit you every day." Her eyes sparkled.

"Yeah, you worry-mouse!" Willowpaw scoffed him over the ear. "It's not like he's moving Clans!"

"I know that!" Jaypaw shook his head indignantly, licking a paw and drawing it over his head.

Ravenpaw stared at his brother, his heart a little tight, but something else worried him more. Blossompaw hadn't come up. He spotted her silver topped head outside the group, standing alone and glaring at him with hard eyes. "I'll be right back." He slipped past his family and through the crowd to his sister's side.

"What do you want?" she grumbled, lashing her tail and turning her eyes away, looking out at the beautiful view from their camp.

"Are you mad at me?" he whispered softly, pain twisting his heart. Was did sister going to be rude to him just because he wanted to heal and not kill?

For an answer, Blossompaw threw her head and snorted, then she looked over at him. "Of course I'm mad. Why would you choose to be a medicine cat, hiding away in a cave instead of fighting or hunting?" She looked at him with her pupils in tight slits and the fur on her shoulders bristling. "If you really want to do that, *fine*, but keep me out of it." She turned and stalked off dramatically with her tail in the air, towards where Maskdapple was seated talking to Silverstrike.

Ravenpaw stared after his sister in silence, yellow eyes wide in shock. He knew that she might be a little angry, after all, this was Blossompaw, but this... why was she acting like he was leaving the Clan? He would still see them every day, wouldn't he? They used to be so close... Why had she started to change?

"Ravenpaw, everything alright?" He turned his head to see that Mossrain was trotting up, his hazel eyes bright an shining as ever. "You look a little stressed. Poppy seeds are best for stress, and also shock and pain. They make you sleepy, too, so they're really helpful after a warrior has hurt themselves, so they'll rest and heal it up. That reminds me of onetime, Frostf--"

The tom cut himself off. His eyes turned distant, and he sighed. "Mossrain, is everything okay?" Ravenpaw dared to ask, forcing Blossompaw to the back of his thoughts.

"Oh, nothing." The tom shook his head, snorting. "I have to learn not to ramble if I'm going to teach you."

"It's fine," Ravenpaw mewed quickly, feeling guilty for an unknown reason. Mossrain flicked his tail, his whiskers twitching.

"Don't be sorry, Ravenpaw, it's not your fault." The tom's eyes softened, then he shook out his neck fur. "Let's head over to the nursery, Goldenpool and I can work together to help you learn about kitting." The young gray tom turned around quickly and padded off. Instantly, his apprentice followed, feeling a little hop in his paws.

This was one of the things he wanted to learn of, about she-cats and their kitting. He knew it was a special time, a bondage of family, between mate and mate and mother and kits and the continuance of the Clan; it was the way of life for every cat, to continue their blood into their little kits that would one day grow to become strong, independent warriors fighting for their Clan.

Shaking his head, Ravenpaw hurried after his mentor, going all the way from Acornstar's meeting rock to the nursery entrance, and he slipped between the ferns to see that Mossrain was just entering right before him, heading over to where Goldenpool was not laying, but tearing at her nest's moss, her tail lashing back and forth.

"Is she okay?" Ravenpaw went up and whispered in Mossrain's ear since the tom had stopped a little short of where the she-cat was destroying her nest.

"I believe our Goldenpool has begun the kitting process," Mossrain replied with a smooth, warm tone, settling down on his haunches. "When she-cats are a few hours from beginning to bring their kits into the world, they start to get restless, and they try to make a better nest to kit in."

"How long does kitting take?" Ravenpaw questioned softly. Goldenpool had already noticed them come in and had stared at them for a silent moment, but then continued to ignore them and began pacing in tight circles in her messy nest.

"She'll probably start when the first bit of orange streaks the sky, and finish after the sun has set. I've checked quite a few times, and it looks like she'll have two kits, which is a little surprising considering the size of her belly, so they will probably all be very strong."

"That sounds good, especially with leaf-bare coming," Ravenpaw said softly, "right?"

Mossrain nodded. "Right. Wait here, and I'll grab the herbs we'll need and something for all of us to eat." The tom stood and left the den without saying anything else, and Ravenpaw felt oddly content to wait.

Just as Mossrain said, orange was streaking the sky when Goldenpool's side began rippling, and her claws flashed as she gripped for her bedding. Mossrain gave her a stick that he had gathered, so she could keep it in her mouth and bite down. Now, Ravenpaw was seated by the two cats as Mossrain ran his paw down her side.

"Feel here," Mossrain meowed. "Don't press too hard, just run your paw over it."

Ravenpaw gave a little nod, and moved a paw forward, gently putting a paw on her swollen flank. He could feel the ripples in her belly and two tiny bumps that must've been the kits, wiggling around slightly. "It's amazing..." he muttered, taking his paw away.

"Once she starts on her first kit, she can rest in between, but she still can't let her body loosen, or she'll risk hurting them if they're close to coming. She has to stay ready or the kits could be crushed, but it'll be easier with only two kits," Mossrain's meow was calm.

Ravenpaw nodded but stayed quiet. They were crouched there in silence, not speaking, just watching Goldenpool's slowly moving sides. It started soon, with her beginning to yowl and grasp the stick in her teeth, and Mossrain continued to softly stroke her sides.

"Come on, Goldenpool, you've helped she-cats through this many

times. Just keep pushing," Mossrain was murmuring, and Goldenpool let out a sudden gasp, still fighting to push harder. Ravenpaw's heart was pounding, and he seemed to be waiting forever.

Goldenpool seemed to be struggling for moons before she gave a sudden gasp for relief, and something slithered out onto the moss from under her tail. Instantly, Mossrain moved forward, and Ravenpaw peered closer to see a silky sac, and he watched his mentor nip it very softly, and out came a little slimy shape.

It was a tiny kit, its fur wet and dark. It was completely silent, but after Mossrain rasped his tongue on its tiny chest, it gave a little gasp, its pink jaws opening wide as it let out a cry. "It's a tom," he meowed, grabbing the kit softly by his neck and putting it against Goldenpool's belly.

Instantly, he began suckling, and Goldenpool raised her head weakly and licked at his fur, a wet purr in her throat. "He's beautiful," she whispered, the stick laying across her thick paws. Then, suddenly, she let out a yowl of pain and flattened herself against the nest.

"I guess the next one is coming quickly," Mossrain meowed, gathering some cobwebs he had and using them to help with the blood that was coming from Goldenpool, which Ravenpaw hadn't noticed before. "It's okay if the queens bleed a little, but you want to make sure it's not too much or they could bleed out. When you're trying to stop the bleeding, make sure you don't block the way for the kit," he explained.

Ravenpaw nodded quickly, trying to take in the information as he watched the two other medicine cats, though his eyes traveled to the little kit. Already, his fur was beginning to dry in spiky clumps, and his tiny little paws kneaded at his mother's belly. He had light, dusty brown fur, and he looked quite adorable.

"Okay, here it comes," Mossrain meowed, continuing to pet Goldenpool's stomach, and she gave another yowl as another sac slid out. "Ravenpaw, come and help me with this one," the tom said. "Nip the sac gently, then lick the kit's fur the wrong way on its chest

to get it breathing."

Ravenpaw crawled forward and, as softly as he could, he nipped at the silky flesh-like sac, and a tiny body slid out, much like the first kit's. This kit's fur was also brown, but also looked a little golden, too. The kit was already gasping for breath, its jaws opened wide, but he still gave it a few raps of his tongue until it cried out.

"Now give her over to Goldenpool," Mossrain ordered, and the young tom followed his mentor's words and put the second kit right by her brother. "Good. Goldenpool, I believe you are done," Mossrain sounded a little tired.

Goldenpool raised her head, blinking softly at the toms. "Thank you, Mossrain, and good job, Ravenpaw." She nodded to them both, then looked down at the two kits suckling at her side. Then, she grunted as a large quiver went through her side.

"Your body must be a little confused," Mossrain guessed, then muttered, "right?" He sounded like Ravenpaw usually did. Goldenpool just looked up, with a glossy pain in her eyes.

"I'm sure that's it. Could you send for Oakcloud? I want him to be the first to meet our kits." Mossrain nodded to the queen's request.

"Ravenpaw, these are borage leaves, they'll help with Goldenpool's milk. Why don't you give her a few, and I'll get Oakcloud?" the tom said, then turned and left quickly. Ravenpaw picked up the hairy leaves the tom had gestured to, then turned and passed them to the golden tabby. As the leaves were passed through their jaws, Ravenpaw's nose accidentally brushed her's, and he gasped as his vision was taken over.

Ravenpaw could see himself, standing next to Mossrain as Oakcloud curled around Goldenpool's back, purring loudly. The tom seemed so glad, but Goldenpool looked strange, tired and in pain. "Goldenpool, are you okay?" Mossrain stepped forward, clearly worried.

"Yes, I think..." The she-cat's weak meow trailed off, and after a heartbeat, she suddenly let out a screaming yowl, pain flowing through the darkening air. Mossrain tried to go forward, but Goldenpool then let

out a gasp of pain but also a relief as a third sac came from under her tail.

"A third? But I only felt two!" Mossrain gasped, leaning forward and grabbing the sac, breaking it open. Goldenpool and Oakcloud hurried to look over, while Ravenpaw backed up a bit, scared. "She's dead..." Mossrain whispered. "How didn't I feel her... How..."

"Ravenpaw, are you okay? Ravenpaw!"

It was Goldenpool's voice that took him back, and he gasped as his eyes opened. "Push!" he said quickly, and the she-cat's eyes turned wide, and he could still tell she knew something was wrong.

"What?" she asked, tail flicking scaredly.

"Push, there's a third kit!" His claws dug at the ground. Goldenpool stared at him, wincing as another ripple went through her body. She stared at him for a moment, then scraped at the moss as she started to push again, her teeth digging together. Ravenpaw begged to StarClan that the vision had been true, and not a trick from his mind.

Then, she let out a gasp, and a little silky sac slid out. Remembering what he did with the second kit, he nipped it open, but the little kit wasn't breathing. He hurriedly began to lick at its chest fur, right as the ferns at the entrance rustled.

"Ravenpaw? What are you doing?" Mossrain's meow came and a moment later the tom was at his side. "What happened?" he gasped.

"There was a third kit..." was Goldenpool's soft reply, while Ravenpaw spotted Oakcloud in the side of his vision. Then the kit let out a little gasp for air, and Mossrain gently nudged Ravenpaw out of the way.

"It's good you found out, Goldenpool," Mossrain muttered, moving the kit to her stomach, and the mother instantly lapped at the kit's ear.

"It was Ravenpaw, actually," the she-cat admitted, and, eyes soft, Oakcloud blinked gratefully at the apprentice and flicked his

shoulder with his tail.

"Thank you," he murmured, then turned back to his mate. Mossrain stayed quiet but set his tail down on the black apprentice's shoulders.

Goldenpool let out a quiet breath. "You caused quite a little storm, didn't you?" The she-cat touched her nose to her third kit, closing her eyes. "Thank you for the warning, StarClan," her eyes flickered to Ravenpaw's for a moment.

Did StarClan show me that vision? he wondered, but then moved it away with his ear. He didn't really care anymore, the kit was saved, and now it was fine.

"Ravenpaw, let's go sleep, shall we?" Mossrain meowed, beginning to stand. Ravenpaw opened his jaws to protest, wanting to stay and watch the kits, but then his mentor added, "I'm sure Goldenpool and Oakcloud want some alone time with their litter."

Blinking and flicking his ears, Ravenpaw looked for a moment at the small kits suckling at their mother's belly, then forced himself to turn around and padded after the older medicine cat. Behind him, he heard Oakcloud whisper, "Welcome to EchoClan, little ones."

Strangely, the words comforted Ravenpaw, and he found himself on bouncy paws as he went into the darkened clearing. The sun had disappeared from the sky, and he saw a few cats still mingling around, with a patrol consisting of three warriors beginning to leave for the sundown patrol. Mossrain turned when they were only a few fox-lengths of the nursery, and looked down at him.

"So, you can choose where you want to sleep for the first few nights of your apprenticeship. I know it'll be hard leaving your littermates, so you can rest with them until you're a little more comfortable, and then we can make you a nest near mine, okay?" The tom's hazel eyes were soft and caring.

"Thanks." Ravenpaw felt a rush of relief from the back of his mind. He didn't even realize he was worried about this, but now he could feel the twist in his heart from not seeing his littermates recently.

All three had gone out together with their mentors to explore the territory in one large patrol, and they had most likely returned when he was busy with Goldenpool.

"Go and find them." Mossrain nudged him with his nose, and the apprentice mewled yet another thanks before hurrying off. He had been resting for so long he didn't really feel tired, but he still wanted to sleep, knowing it was just the excitement of delivering kits... No, not that...

Did Ravenpaw save his first life? He slowed as the vision came back to him. Would that have really happened, would the kit have really died if he hadn't been warned? He had forgotten about the vision in his happiness of seeing the kit breath and watching Goldenpool's eyes glow.

If this is what saving lives is like... Ravenpaw thought, turning his head up to the sky and closing his eyes. *Then I want to do it every day.*

Blossompaw probably sounds pretty mean, but wait for her time to shine when it's from her own POV(which might not happen, I'm not sure yet). You may like her a little more, or you'll absolutely despise her! It'll depend on you!

Question #1: Who's your favorite of all the cats you've met?

Question #2: Who's your favorite of Ravenpaw's siblings: Blossompaw, Jaypaw, Willowpaw, or Stonecoat and Shadefur? (Stone and Shade are kinda considered one)

Chapter Three

"Ow!"

Rowanpaw was awoken by a sharp pain in his leg, and he shot his head up to see Carppaw tugging past him. "Sorry," the tom muttered, flicking his tail, then he continued over Rowanpaw's brother, Blazepaw, who slept like a badger.

"Do you know how far the sun is up?" Rowanpaw asked, stretching his jaws open in a yawn. Carppaw rolled his head, snorting.

"I just woke up, too, you know. If you wanna find out, just get up," he grumbled, then struggled to escape through the small den entrance, grunting while he did. Licking his lips, Rowanpaw grumbled his annoyance, then followed the other BatClan apprentice out of the small hollow log they called a den. And not only did he step on Blazepaw, he accidentally set his paw down on Frondpaw's tail, though the she-cat mewled but didn't wake up, luckily.

He also struggled to go through the den entrance, and his belly had to scrape against the wood ground of the apprentices' log to allow him to get out. Once he stood on his strong legs, he shook dust from his thin coat, then looked around, blinking his eyes constantly to make sure they didn't dry. The air in their camp was thick and hurt his eyes, but he disliked the territory even more, so he couldn't complain.

"Ratpaw!"

He recognized the voice of his mentor before he even turned around, but his heart still soared when he saw her light ginger coat. "Hey, Emberheart," he mewed, tail flicking happily. He always got happy when he saw her and was usually pretty down away from her. He enjoyed being by her side.

"Are you ready to head out hunting?" she asked, stopping beside

him with her yellow eyes still shaking sleep away.

"Hunting again?" he asked, his tail drooping. He had been an apprentice for just about a moon, and he has only one battle practice session. His mentor looked at him sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, but we have to. With Ashbreeze's new litter born, we'll need as much prey as we can find. Dawnstar told all of the mentors to hold off on battle training until after leaf-bare, so the kits can grow up strong. She really doesn't want to lose another litter to hunger." The she-cat flicked her tail, though her eyes showed she was hiding something.

"I don't want that either," he muttered softly, casting a quick glance at his mentor's flank. He could see every one of her ribs, and the bones on her hindquarters were beginning to show. She always ate less than the rest of the Clan; she wanted to make sure everybody was full first. *But the Clan hasn't been full for moons*, he thought to himself, then forced the dark thoughts away. It did seem like she was beginning to get rounder, so perhaps she was eating a bit more.

"Are you ready?" she asked again, shaking out her coat. He nodded, and she blinked kindly at him, then led him across the small camp and towards the entrance. The sunlight that was trying to shine through the thick canopy of trees was dull and almost gray, telling him that it would be another stuffy day in the pine woods.

She led him up the rocky path that allowed them to the open air, and even though Rowanpaw was happy to get fresh air flowing into his lungs, he was grumpy because of the thick, sappy taste in the wind. His nose started to curl in disgust as he watched Emberheart open her jaws and take in a huge breath, letting it out slowly.

"Doesn't it smell wonderful?" she whispered, looking down at him, and she chuckled at the look on his face. "Oh, Rowanpaw, stop it!" She shoved his shoulder then leaped from the camp entrance, her claws scraping against the hard rock surface. He flicked his tail, watching her as she landed.

Because of her large, muscular frame and short legs, her body thumped loudly on the mushy ground, and he could hear the

mushing sound as she adjusted her paws on the soft, wet soil. A shiver went through his body, but he forced himself to leap from the rock and drop down next to her.

His jump and landing were surprisingly good for his age; he had a different body shape than most of his Clanmates, it wasn't as broad and he had long, sturdy legs that helped him with leaping, and a long thin tail that helped with direction. He let out a grumble of disgust as the mud-like soil stuck to his paws, with pine needles embedded in them.

"Gross," he muttered, and Emberheart let out a snort, flicking her ear, then she headed forward on confident paws, seeming to have no problem with the fact that her toes disappeared with each step. They went in silence, with both their mouths open for the scent of prey. *All I can smell is pine needles and sap*, Rowanpaw grumbled to himself, lashing his tail.

But, he continued looking, his growling stomach enough to make him push the bad smells away and focus on a slightly-better smell. It was a frog. Personally, he hated frog, but his howling stomach would enjoy a piece of crow-food at the moment. Emberheart had smelled the frog, too, and she nodded to him, then flicked her head to the right, ordering him to go that way.

They stalked in a circle, watching through the thin undergrowth for a sign of prey, and Rowanpaw found it. His stomach sank, and he stood from his crouch and marched forward. The frog was lying on it's back, with its slimy stomach ripped open and its insides now on the outside and staining the dark ground around it.

"Ashbreeze and Lakeshine would've enjoyed that," Emberheart sighed, walking up and nudging the dead creature with a claw.

"I don't think they would've enjoyed it, but yeah, they needed something to eat," Rowanpaw countered, and his mentor just gave a soft snort.

"Yeah, I guess," she sighed, then shook out her fur. She moved forward and started scraping her claws around at the body parts that should definitely not be showing, fitting them back into the

small body, then she looked at her apprentice. "Ashbreeze needs anything we can find. I'll bring this to her, while you keep hunting. I'll meet up with you near the dead tree." She didn't wait for an answer, picking up the frog in her teeth and carefully beginning to walk away.

Rowanpaw wanted to tell her it was no use, but he was starting to gag after a bloody body part fell away from the frog, but Emberheart either didn't notice or decided she couldn't risk dropping more. Rowanpaw tried to walk away, he really did, but the claws gripping his stomach were hurting so much, he forced himself to turn around and walk over.

The part could've been from a mouse and he wouldn't have had eaten it any other time, but he had passed his chance of fresh-kill the day before to give his share to Ashbreeze, and now he couldn't turn away. He knew he wouldn't get in trouble for it. How could he be punished for eating something no larger than a mouse tail? And it's not like anybody would notice.

He dug his claws into the ground as he crunched down on the chewy meat, gagging many times, but he managed to swallow it. He turned around and started to head towards the dead tree, hoping to find something along the way, but his stomach suddenly turned, and a moment later the piece of frog was back on the ground in front of him, mushed and covered with saliva.

Not worth it, he thought, flicking his tongue out. He had pine needles in his mouth, after grabbing the morsel from the soil before, and now his regurgitated meal was beginning to sink down. He dry heaved once again, and hurried along his way, trying to forget the bad taste. He found a little bit of murky water in a little hollow in the soil and took a few laps. It tasted horrid, but he was used to the taste of water like this because it was the way all his water had been tasting like recently.

Blinking his eyes, Rowanpaw licked his lips, feeling a hopelessness rise inside his chest. Why was this happening to them? Why did they have to go hungry? *Maybe the other Clans are no better off*, he thought to himself and kept that as his main thought as he headed towards the Old Thunderpath.

It took no time to cross their small territory, and when he emerged on the black path's side, he took in a gasp of grateful air, happy the sap and pine needle scent had faded slightly. He stayed there for a moment, looking across the wide path to the other side, where bright, glowing grass swished in the wind, and he could even see a rabbit, just hopping along peacefully. It even looked at him, like it knew he couldn't cross, like it knew it was safe from harm.

Suddenly, a loud screech cut the air, and before the rabbit could move, a white blur jumped through the air and took the prey's life with a single swipe of a paw. "See, I told you I could do it without it running away!"

The blur turned out to be a long-legged lithe white tom, and, by the look of his flank, he was extremely well fed. He looked smaller than the average BatClan cat, but Rowanpaw knew that SageClan warriors were small and quick to race across the moorland.

"Well good job to you, Sparrowpaw," another cat emerged, with thick golden tabby fur and strong haunches. He looked the same size as the white tom, Sparrowpaw.

I rather have the name Sparrowpaw than R-- his thought was cut off as he watched as the two apprentices just started walking away, leaving the kill behind him.

"We'll come and get it later," Sparrowpaw meowed carelessly.

"Or we'll leave it for BatClan," the golden tabby replied snootily. "I bet the starving scavengers haven't seen a piece of prey that nice in moons!" he let out a yowl of laughter.

Rowanpaw dug his claws into the soft ground, rage flooding through his body. He wanted to chase after the cats and show them the damage a BatClan cat could do, even without any training. They were weaklings, making fun of the less fortunate--they wouldn't think that way if they had to live like BatClan, watching their Clanmates starve while they search desperately for any bit of food.

Maybe I will take the rabbit, he thought, hating the idea of the two apprentice being right about his Clan being scavengers, but what

they had joked about was true; the last piece of prey that was big enough to feed two cats half-full was a dead crow they found a moon earlier.

"Don't."

Rowanpaw whipped his head around to see Emberheart walking up, her eyes sad as she stared over at the prey. "But we need it, nobody would know!" He didn't know why he said it, he wasn't even sure if he cared that much, but it was already out.

"We may be starving to death, but we follow the warrior code still," the she-cat murmured, coming to stand next to him. "Those apprentices just broke the code. Any piece of prey should be caught not for fun or sport, but for feeding the less fortunate."

"But we're less fortunate right now, aren't we?" his tone turned harsh without meaning to, and he muttered a quiet "sorry" and looked back over the cracked Thunderpath.

"Yes, I guess we are." Emberheart dropped her tail on his shoulder. "But we don't steal. If we will eat, it will be something from our territory or unclaimed territory. Dawnstar has a plan for more territory. It's very, very risky, but we may have no other choice..." Emberheart's mew faltered.

"What's her plan?" Rowanpaw looked at her quickly.

She let out a sigh. "Starting tomorrow, the Clan is going to be put on a strict schedule. Half the Clan will hunt during the day while the other trains for battle. When sundown comes, we rest until the moon shows, then the cats who trained for battle in the day will now hunt at night, while the day hunters do battle practice. We will sleep again at sunrise." She seemed rather happy to get it all out.

"But, why battle practice? What's happening?" he asked, something burning in his chest. Desire. That was it. He was burning with the desire to help his Clan get stronger and to finally train for battle.

"Before leaf-bare..." Emberheart trailed off at looked at him, locking eyes with his. "We will try to take EchoClan's territory."

"But why would we do that? You just said we wouldn't go on other Clan's territory!" the apprentice exclaimed, and the she-cat dropped her head.

"I know, Rowanpaw, but with us being surrounded by the mountains and the Old Twolegplace, we have nowhere to hunt. We need to try to get more territory, even if it's to steal from others. It's fair, in their favor, even. Dawnstar knows we will lose, but the warriors need hope that they're fighting for something." Emberheart breathed out.

"Oh." Rowanpaw looked down at his paws. It was true, he knew it. BatClan warriors were losing hope, he knew that as well, because he was, too. Having new kits did bring up the spirits of his Clanmates, but they needed something more. They needed something to fight for.

And that will be their lives against EchoClan, so they might just survive the harsh winds of the leaf-bare cold.

How did you guys like a view from BatClan? I hope you enjoyed it, because I love my little Rowanpaw, and it goes pretty deep. Just for future reference, there might be a lot of POVs from different characters, including, but not limited to: Ravenpaw, Rowanpaw, Blossompaw, Jaypaw, and Willowpaw. There may also be a small amount of chapters from the POVs of Amberbreeze from SageClan and Roseclaw of CrowClan, so you can see what life is like in all four Clans. You will also get to know a lot of their history! Yay!

Question #1: What do you think of Rowanpaw?

Question #2: Rowanpaw has a little secret, can you guess what it is?

(PS I didn't really plan to have two questions at each chapter's end, but I guess there will be one or two questions once and a while! Have a good day my Clanmates!)

Chapter Four

"This is... coltsfoot?" Ravenpaw was frustrated that he was already on his third day of apprenticeship--counting the day Goldenpool kitted--and had been told the herbs constantly but continued to forget. Couldn't he do anything right?

"Marigold," Mossrain corrected. "Use your nose, Ravenpaw. Marigold's scent is strong and pretty bitter, while coltsfoot smells soft and a little sweet," he explained. "Can you remember what they do?" His head tilted, his hazel eyes glowing in the cave's darkness, which Ravenpaw was still trying to get used to.

"Marigold helps stop infections..." he meowed slowly, and Mossrain nodded encouragingly. "And coltsfoot helps... queens... get more milk?" He knew that he was wrong immediately, even though Mossrain didn't change his demeanor.

"Coltsfoot helps with shortness of breath," he reminded his apprentice. "Its borage leaves that helps with milk, and it brings down fevers. But don't worry about being wrong, 'cause I once made a really big mistake! When I was a kit, I had a cough so I decided to get the herbs myself, since Goldenpool was busy. But instead of grabbing tansy--which you feed to cats in small doses to help a cough--I ate yarrow and gave poor Maskdapple quite a bit of fear when I started vomiting everywhere!" he let out a chuckle as he spoke of his mother.

Ravenpaw tried to join his mentor's amusement, but he didn't really have the energy. "I bet Goldenpool was mad," Ravenpaw mewed, wanting to keep the tom happy since he loved to continue talking so much and Ravenpaw didn't really mind listening.

"Oh, she was like a fox!" Mossrain let out a short yowl of amusement. "She was so mad about me mixing up the herbs, she started training me the next day! That's how I learned that yarrow is used for extracting poison from wounds or used to make a cat throw up if they ate something bad!" Mossrain gave a snort. "If only

I knew that back then, I would've saved myself a lot of trouble!"

"But if you didn't, you would've had to wait for moons before starting to learn the herbs, right?" Ravenpaw mewed softly, and the tom's expression softened, showing slight surprise of the thought.

"I guess so, Ravenpaw, I guess so..." He shook his head and jumped to his paws, going over to where they stored the herbs and pulled out a bundle of big hairy leaves that had a calming, mellow scent. Borage leaves, maybe? "Can you take these to Goldenpool? You mix up the marigold reminded me she might need extra milk, so her having a few borage leaves would be good for her kits." The tom dropped the herbs in front of his apprentice.

"Of course!" Excitement sped Ravenpaw's heart. He took the herbs and hurried from the den, his yellow eyes shining with happiness. He had visited Goldenpool at least once a day to see her kits, and he always found himself looking at the little one he saved--Stormkit. Goldenpool named her that after she had said, '*you caused quite a little storm, didn't you?'*

Ravenpaw's head cleared as the milky scent of the nursery surrounded him, and he padded to the back where Goldenpool lay, giving a mew of welcome. "Did Mossrain send borage leaves?" she questioned, her ears flicking. The apprentice nodded, dropping the leaves in front of her.

"He wanted to make sure you had enough milk," the black tom explained, then crouched down and looked at the kits. Their fur was dry and fluffy, and they crawled around feebly with their eyes still closed shut. Dustkit, the dusty brown tom, was attempting to climb up Goldenpool's flank, but failed and fell back onto his sister, Heatherkit, who mewled angrily and wiggled like a worm.

Ravenpaw turned his head to the part of the nest right under his muzzle, and he saw little Stormkit crawling her way towards him, her solid brown fur only disrupted by darker jagged stripes. She managed to get over the edge of the next, and the apprentice looked at Goldenpool, but she seemed curious about what her kit was doing and made no move to bring her back.

Little Stormkit tumbled over the side of the nest, but Ravenpaw managed to soften her fall by using his paw, and she crawled over it then ventured towards his chest, where she cuddled into his fur and promptly fell asleep, a weak purr rising from her tiny throat. Ravenpaw felt a strong, loving power go over him, and he tucked his muzzle against his throat and gave her head a soft lick.

"It seems she knows you were the one who saved her," Goldenpool commented, just as the nursery entrance rustled, and Oakcloud's strong scent came to Ravenpaw as the handsome brown tabby made it to his mate, pressing his forehead against her's for a moment, then he looked down at his kits.

"Where's Stormk--" The tom broke off as he found his youngest curled at Ravenpaw's chest, and his eyes softened, looking at the medicine cat apprentice with smooth eyes. He gave a blink of acknowledgment, then leaned down to give Heatherkit's golden-brown fur a soft lap from his tongue.

"Oakcloud, do you think you could go get me a mouse?" Goldenpool looked at her mate with glowing golden eyes.

"The last mouse caught was from the sunup patrol, so it'll be cold by now," Oakcloud meowed. "Do you want a pigeon I caught a little earlier? It should still be warm." His tongue flicked over his whiskers.

"I don't really like feathers..." Goldenpool sighed, blinking sadly. "But I guess I can deal with it." Ravenpaw hadn't heard the she-cat act like this before, she usually wasn't picky about her prey.

"I get it," Oakcloud grumbled, getting to his paws. "You two were talking about private medicine cat business and I came in and ruined it." His tail flicked annoyingly, but his eyes were glowing with love and amusement. "I'll see you later." He touched his nose to Goldenpool's ear, then turned and left the den, his tail hitting Ravenpaw's shoulder lightly.

"Why did you want him to leave?" Ravenpaw asked since they hadn't been talking about anything but the kits.

"Because I've been meaning to ask you.." Goldenpool suddenly turned serious, locking eyes with Ravenpaw, and he was suddenly aware of his heart beating faster and faster, and he checked on Stormkit to make sure she was still sleeping before looking back up. "How did you know that Stormkit was there?" she asked suddenly.

Ravenpaw knew instantly what she was talking about, and his mind flashed back to that moment, when he had touched her nose and saw them grieving for their lost, and how broken Mossrain had sounded. "Wha... What do you mean?" He swallowed heavily, his throat drying as fear clamped his heart, and Stormkit seemed to stir. He gave her a slow lick to calm her so she continued to sleep.

"You gave me the herbs, then you stood rock still for a few moments, just like medicine cats when StarClan talks to us. Did you hear something? Did someone tell you about Stormkit?" her tone was soft and caring, and she blinked softly at him. "Ravenpaw, if you did hear something, or see something, then that means StarClan already accepts you as a medicine cat. And when medicine cats get anything from StarClan, they can share with their mentor or apprentice, then their leader. Do you understand?" The whole time she spoke, the golden tabby didn't look away, even when Heatherkit let out a little mewl.

"I..." Ravenpaw's throat was dry after Goldenpool telling him so much. She almost sounded like Mossrain, but so much more serious... "I think I had a vision." He looked strongly into her eyes. "I saw you and Oakcloud looking down at Heatherkit and Dustkit, then-then Stormkit slid out. She... she was dead, and Mossrain was really sad about losing her, he sounded really hopeless..." He shivered at the memory.

Goldenpool's eyes flashed with sadness, and she looked down at Stormkit, who was still purring, curled on her back and half hidden in Ravenpaw's chest. He looked at her, too, and a protective instinct came over him. He didn't want to lose Stormkit, after saving her...

"Do you remember how it happened?" Goldenpool's voice broke into his thoughts. He answered without a hesitation but didn't turn his eyes from Stormkit.

"When I touched your nose..." he muttered.

"Ravenpaw, look at me," Goldenpool meowed softly, and he looked up. "Can you try to do it again? Just to see if StarClan was just helping you once, or... if you're like Echo."

"Echo?" Who was that? A loner named after his Clan, maybe?

Goldenpool sighed. "Young cats need to learn the history of the Clan," she shook her head. "Echo was our founder, just like Crow, Sage, and Bat were for the other Clans," Goldenpool began, and Ravenpaw knew he was in for a story.

I didn't know we were made by loners, he thought to himself quickly, then focused on the nursing medicine cat.

"The Clans were made by groups of loners who wanted to live in peace, each in their own territory. Echo was the leader of our Clan, and she had the power to see from other cats' eyes and look into their memories," she explained. "Echo was a very powerful cat, and she comes back every time a leader from EchoClan loses their last life, when the next leader gets theirs, and when medicine cats get their full names."

"So I'll get to meet Echo?" Ravenpaw asked, his head tilted.

"Hopefully," she answered, her eyes flashing with something for a moment, then she flicked it away. "A few moons ago StarClan told me a bird would save me from grief; it wasn't a prophecy, it was just a message from my old mentor. A raven is a bird, and you definitely saved me from many moons of grief. I wouldn't be surprised if you were to save more from grief than just me," she meowed, though something sounded a little off.

*A bird would save me from grief...*Her words flowed through his head.

"So, will you try again?" Goldenpool asked hopefully.

Ravenpaw gave a little nod, then thought about how he would try. It took him barely a moment, and he looked down at Stormkit and gently touched his nose to her's. Instantly, his mind was swept away

into darkness.

Stormkit, now at least two moons old, was waddling around the camp clearing, her golden eyes wide with excitement as she tottered after a beetle crawling through the grass. The sun was beginning to set, and the clearing was almost empty of cats. She seemed incredibly happy, pattering after the shiny black creature but unable to catch it.

"Stormkit! It's time to go back inside!" Goldenpool called from the entrance of the nursery, looking strong and powerful with rippling golden tabby fur and glowing eyes as her kit left her hunt behind and began to head over. But Stormkit paused when something landed on her nose, and she squeaked and jumped back in surprise.

Another flake of snow floated down in front of her nose, and she instantly pattered her paw at it. "What is this stuff?" she mewled in a small, young voice.

"Snow," Goldenpool answered, slowly walking forward towards her daughter. "Leaf-bare has started."

Ravenpaw blinked his eyes to find himself back in the nursery, with little Stormkit, now back to being only a few sunrises old, still cuddled into his chest. "It wasn't important, or, at least, it didn't feel important..." Ravenpaw muttered, then explained what he had seen to the queen.

"I thought that maybe your gift showed grief, but a kit seeing snow for the first time is nothing to be sad about, except for the hungry moons to come..." Goldenpool muttered, nudging Dustkit closer to her belly. "Maybe it shows just a random time in the future? Maybe special moments or something?" The she-cat seemed to be asking herself, so Ravenpaw stayed quiet.

Stormkit let out a mewl and wiggled around, her paws flailing through the air until she managed to get back onto her belly, then she began to make a slow way towards her mother's belly. Ravenpaw leaned forward and gently picked her up by her scruff and put her next to her littermates, where she instantly started to suckle.

"What if they're just useless dreams? What if Stormkit dying wasn't true, just my mind messing with me?" he mewed, his heart sinking. Did he cause a big fuss just because his head played a trick on him? He had dreams like that before, where he woke up and everybody in the Clan was dead...

"Well, then we'll have to test more dreams," Goldenpool meowed, then added, "do you know what color Stormkit's eyes were? We could judge the truth in your dreams to see if they match up; dream Stormkit's eyes and real Stormkit's eyes," she explained.

"Golden," he answered immediately. "They were just like yours, filled with so much adventure and curiosity..." his mew trailed off.

"Well, good. When she opens her eyes in a little over a quarter moon, we'll find out, if you don't have any other dreams, that is." Goldenpool touched her nose to his cheek. "Go and eat with your friends, but make sure to tell Mossrain about this; we can't leave him out, he's your mentor, too. And, make sure if you have any more dreams like these, to come to either of us immediately. It's what medicine cats do."

Ravenpaw's littermates were all out on patrol, so he found himself in the apprentices' hideout. Their den was underground, the entrance being a hole at the side of a rock that used to be the way in for a badger sett. Inside, there was another tunnel that leads into a little dip in the ground that was open to the air, though the walls went straight up and were impossible to climb. It didn't seem natural, but who made it was unknown. Definitely no cat.

To Ravenpaw's left, the two tortoiseshells Brightpaw and Petalpaw sat chatting, while the three littermates Firepaw, Flamepaw, and Featherpaw were sharing a rather large rabbit, once and a while adding some comments.

"So, I jumped over the creak, and I went after that squirrel like a racing rabbit!" Petalpaw was meowing, tail high in the air and green eyes shining. "It went up a birch, but I didn't give up! I jumped up after it and chased it through three different trees before I finally caught it! Kept the tail, too, for proof!" The apprentice--who was only two moons from becoming a warrior with

Brightpaw--flung a bushy red tail from behind his back and it landed right where Featherpaw was about to bite down on her rabbit.

"Oh, you're gonna get it!" The dark-red tabby leaped up and pounced, rolling the tortoiseshell over, and they became a whirling bundle of flashing fur, and they banged against the den's solid walls, and bits of dirt crumbled around them.

It didn't take long for Petalpaw to trap Featherpaw on the ground; she was barely over two moons of training, which wasn't enough even with her fiery determination. "Ha! You can never beat me!" the tom boasted, raising his head proudly. Featherpaw took the chance to throw him off with her powerful back legs, then bounced over and hid behind her brothers.

Petalpaw, looking a little beaten, licked a pad and drew it over his left cheek, where one of the few patches of white on his black, orange, and red-brown pelt lay. Another patch was at the beginning underneath of his tail, his back right paw, his left front paw, his belly and down the inside of his left back leg. Oh, and he also had a little streak of white on the front top of his left front leg.

He has a very particular pelt, Ravenpaw thought, twitching his whiskers. He, his sister Brightpaw, his mother Maskdapple, and Maskdapple's mother Dappletail, were the only tortoiseshells in the Clan. Their pelts weren't the best for the dark, dense forest that made up one side of EchoClan's territory, though that didn't really matter--they were usually moor hunters, racing after rabbits on the moorland. And, while Featherpaw's brothers and mother usually hunted on the moor, she and her father, Foxpounce, were incredibly good at hunting in the forests.

Of course, every cat could hunt in either. They all had strong, long legs that could easily leap into trees or across the hills, so they really hunted anywhere, as long as they were on their territory, of course.

"Ravenpaw! You're a medicine cat, don't you agree?" The mew was from Brightpaw, and he turned to look at her glowing blue-green eyes.

"Sorry... I- I wasn't listening," he mewed feebly, scraping his claws over the soil. Why was he embarrassing himself like this? And in front of the other apprentices!

"Oh, you're such a daydreamer!" Brightpaw laughed happily, then meowed, "Petalpaw thinks that he could hunt and fight with only three legs."

"Oh." Ravenpaw licked his lips. He hadn't been taught about this, but he thought quickly about it. "Well, it depends which leg, I think. If it's a front leg, you wouldn't be able to use your other paw because you have to balance your body weight. But if it's a back leg, you could still use a front leg, but you would have to practice your leaping because you'll have to leap into the air a lot."

"So, he's half right?" Firepaw guessed, and Flamepaw rolled his eyes.

"Please! He's barely even older than a kit, and you believe him? He's just making it up to fit in!" the red tabby growled.

Ravenpaw ducked his head, his ears flattening and heat running through his dark fur. But, Featherpaw raised her head, her whiskers twitching towards her brother. "He's been working with Mossrain, and that tom never stops talking! I wouldn't be surprised if Ravenpaw knew all the herbs right now!"

The black apprentice felt fear run through him. What if she asks me to name some? He thought, his heart quickening. At the moment, he could only remember borage leaves and marigold, though his stress got him to think of two more; catmint, for greencough and whitecough; and chervil roots, which helped with bellyaches.

"Ravenpaw? What are you doing in here?" The young apprentice turned around to see Jaypaw slipping into the area, a mouse hanging from his teeth. Willowpaw followed him, and she spat a skinny vole onto the ground.

"Why does that matter?" she meowed, then touched Ravenpaw's back with her tail as she crouched down. "He's here, and that means we can talk about our hunt!" She let out a mewl of excitement just

as Blossompaw entered. She had a small wood mouse in her mouth, and she looked at Ravenpaw for a moment before plodding over and settling next to Flamepaw, who seemed not to mind despite his unneeded grudge against everybody.

"Yeah, Willowpaw caught her first catch today!" Jaypaw's tail flicked. "Of course, we all know I caught mine yesterday," he added, causing Patchpaw to groan dramatically.

"Yes, Jaypaw, we know! You caught the sparrow Foxpounce missed, but remember he only missed it because you couldn't shut up!" the older apprentice meowed loudly.

Jaypaw looked a little hurt, then shook it away and looked at Willowpaw. "You talk about your hunt!" he mewled.

"It wasn't even a real hunt! Its leg was hurt so it couldn't run," she ended with her voice going flat, and she nudged the vole at her toes. "I just got lucky."

Jaypaw snorted, then started on the amazing "true" story of how Willowpaw heard it before Foxpounce and the patrol and caught it with a perfect leap and how impressed the warriors were, but Ravenpaw just let it fade into the background, his yellow eyes locked on the mouse.

The mouse had been injured, so it was killed. That was like if a fox found one of EchoClan's warriors injured and killed them. The mouse didn't have the chance to protect itself. How was that fair? It probably had its own family, waiting for it to return, only to find out they had lost them to a predator.

Ravenpaw's mind flashed to the memory of watching Maskdapple find out her sister had been killed by a badger when he was only three moons old. It had been a warm night, and he had been watching his littermates play when the patrol that was led by his father pulled in the limp white and brown body of Maskdapple's sister; Ravenpaw felt horrible of not remembering the she-cat's name.

He could still hear the tortoiseshell's tearing cry as it echoed

through the night, while their mother Dappletail collapsed to the ground and didn't move until the next day to bury her lost kin. Cherrypatch! *That was her name!* the tom remembered suddenly.

A shiver ran through his coat. *What if I lose somebody?* He looked at each of his three littermates in turn. Blossompaw wouldn't even look at him, and Willowpaw and Jaypaw were too busy play arguing to notice his dire expression. But, Featherpaw did.

"Ravenpaw, are you okay?" she asked, her large ears flicking, and he forced himself to nod, taking in a deep breath.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm good..."

Question #1: How do you like the apprentices?

Question #2: How do you feel about Ravenpaw's power?

Chapter Five

Rowanpaw shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. "Can't take it, Ratpaw?" a mocking meow called, and the solid brown tom looked up to see Carppaw facing him, crouched down with his haunches in the air.

The young apprentice licked his jaws, his amber eyes narrowing at his denmate. Carppaw was older and had gone through more battle training than he had, but he was too arrogant and too sure of his bulk, not realizing what Rowanpaw lacked in strength, he took for in speed and agility.

Quick as he could, Rowanpaw shot forward towards the older apprentice, his eyes looking to the left but his paws ready to leap to the right. Sadly, Carppaw knew the trick, but he played along for a moment. He braced his body to be attacked from his own left, but as Rowanpaw leaped into the air, the brown tom veered out of the way then quickly slammed his front paws into Rowanpaw's side, sending him flying.

He landed heavily on the hard stone ground of the camp, and dust floated up around him. His shoulder was sharp with pain and his eyes were fuzzy from the impact, but he didn't give up. He forced himself to his paws and jumped at Carppaw again. But, like the last time, the bigger apprenntice just easily moved to the side, though this time he swatted at Rowanpaw's back leg, so when he landed his body collapsed under him.

"Come on, Ratpaw, surely you can do better than that?" Carppaw sighed, sitting down. Giving up, Rowanpaw sighed and went over to sit next to him.

"I'm trying, all right?" the younger tom grumbled, scratching his sharp claws over the stone.

"You'll get better soon, I know it." Frondpaw came trotting up, her brown eyes shining. Despite her ribs showing through her coat, she

kept her dark tortoiseshell fur slick and shining. Rowanpaw's stomach yowled in agony when he saw she had a wiry rat in her teeth.

She dropped it down in front of the two toms just as Blazepaw made his way over, his dark eyes rounded with hunger and saliva dripping from his narrowed muzzle. "Prey time?" he muttered, dropping down beside his brother. "Finally!"

"Who gets the first bite?" Rowanpaw wondered, trying to calm the voice in his head that was yowling, do it! Just take it!

"Since you share its name, why don't you take the first bite, Ratpaw?" Frondpaw offered. Despite his happiness to being allowed to eat first, Rowanpaw was upset about the she-cat making even more notice to his name. But, he swallowed his pride and leaned forward, taking a soft bite from the hard flesh, forcing himself to not just take the whole thing for himself.

Right as he leaned back, Frondpaw moved forward to take her share, then Carppaw and finally Blazepaw. By the time they each got two bites, there was barely scraps left, and it was given to Frondpaw because it had been her kill. The tortoiseshell stared at it for a moment, her eyes narrowed with starvation, but then she shook her head and stood up, ruffling out her fur.

"I'm going to bring this to Ashbreeze. Does anybody want to come see the kits?" She looked at the group as she picked up the remaining morsels.

"I will," Rowanpaw offered, licking any bit of blood from his jaws before standing, stretching out his legs, and following the she-cat. She seemed happy with her company, but stayed quiet and began to head across the small clearing. A few warriors were practicing their own moves, and the two apprentices had to slip along the stone camp wall to make sure they were out of the way.

They soon made it to the nursery and elders' den, a small little place surrounded by stiff dry bushes. They forced themselves through and saw Lakeshine sleeping in her nest, the bones in her haunches jutting upwards, while Ashbreeze raised a slow head to look at

them.

"This is all we have to offer," Frondpaw muttered, dropping the scraps in front of the speckled gray queen.

"Thank you, Frondpaw," the she-cat whispered, then looked at Rowanpaw. "Ratpaw, would you like to meet my kits?"

He nodded, his mind calm for a moment, then he moved forward and peered into the nest. Ashbreeze was definitely the healthiest of the Clan. She was given almost half the prey the Clan caught, so her kits could grow strong. She didn't like it, but it did keep her kits alive, so that was the good side.

She had three. One was a dark brown tomkit; another a lighter shade; and the last a blue-gray she-kit with white on the bottom half of her little body. "The she-kit is Bluekit, the light tom is Breamkit, and the dark one is Bramblekit," the queen sounded proud of herself.

"Are you happy to have them?" Rowanpaw asked it without even thinking, and he tried fixing it by adding, "I mean, are you scared of them not getting enough prey?" But it just made it sound worse.

The speckled she-cat didn't seem to mind, however, and her blue eyes sparkled softly as she nudged Breamkit closer with a mud stained white paw. "Yes, I am happy to have them, but I am also scared of losing them." She looked up at him. "It's the price to pay as a queen. Raising kits mean new warriors, but new warriors mean new battles, new wounds, new deaths..." She looked back down.

"Don't worry, I'll protect 'em," Rowanpaw tried sounding brave, and he actually almost convinced himself.

Ashbreeze let out a soft snort. "I know you will, Ratpaw. You had to grow up without a mother and father, but you'll understand what it means to have a family. You'll find a cat one day to father kits with, and you'll watch the next generation of warriors rise with your blood in them," She meowed wisely.

Rowanpaw didn't really like the thought. He liked kits, they looked

so fun and he wanted to help raise them, but the thought of getting a mate seemed odd to him. It didn't appeal to his heart. Besides, the closest cat to his age was Frondpaw. After that, it was Hazelfur--Emberheart's littermate. That seemed a little odd to think about.

"Ratpaw!" At the thought of his mentor, she appeared, sticking her head through the bushes. "We're going hunting, remember?" she called.

"We are? Bye Frondpaw, bye Ashbreeze, and kits." Rowanpaw waved his tail in goodbye then quickly hurried from the den. They were night hunters, not day hunters, but it didn't really matter; they were hunting, and that meant more prey to eat. "Where are we hunting at?" he meowed.

"Come with me." Emberheart turned around and hurried away. Confused, the apprentice followed his mentor to the leader's den not far away, and he went into the shadows of the bramble bush that curled over and created Dawnstar's den.

Waiting in the shadows of the den was Dawnstar, her pretty tan tabby coat freshly brushed but showing signs of age and hunger. Near her were the youngest warriors Birchsplash and Hazelfur, both of them looking as confused as Rowanpaw. "What's going on?" he meowed but was ignored as they sat next to the two other warriors, facing their leader, who waited a moment before speaking.

"Emberheart and I were speaking, and we have both agreed we need to find more prey to strengthen ourselves for the battle. She has offered to lead a search patrol into the Old Twolegplace to try to find prey. I told her to pick three cats, and she choose you all. Her littermates, and her apprentice." Dawnstar's pale amber eyes turned to Rowanpaw.

"How long will we be gone?" Hazelfur asked, her tail flicking excitedly, wanting to leave their small territory without protest.

"A quarter moon, maybe more," Emberheart replied. "We'll head far into the Twolegplace to see if any Twolegs are left and if there are any predators. We'll eat anything we find on our way in, then everything we catch on our way back goes to the Clan. Hopefully, if

we find something not too far, we can start traveling there to get prey."

Dawnstar gave the tabby a nod. "You will all be leaving now, we haven't time to waste. Sandflight doesn't have much, but she has just enough herbs to help you with the journey, Ratpaw." His leader looked at him. He shook his head bravely.

"Sandflight should save her herbs for cats who need it more." He stared into her cool gaze, trying not to flinch.

"You're a good cat, Ratpaw," she meowed, then turned and looked at the four cats. "If any of you do not wish to go, speak now, or hold your peace."

"I want to help my Clan, and this is the right way," Birchsplash meowed, puffing out his chest, and Hazelfur nodded in quick agreement.

"Ratpaw, do you want to come or stay here? I'll get you a mentor to help with your training if you don't want to," Emberheart meowed, but he instantly shook his head.

"I want to come. It'll be good experience, right?" He looked at his mentor. "But I'll stay if you want me to."

"I want you to come, mouse-brain," Emberheart rolled her eyes. "Let's get going, shall we?"

"One more thing," Dawnstar meowed, standing up. "I want you all to remember there will be only three fully-trained warriors and one young apprentice. You will not have back up or a medicine cat, so you need to stay safe at all costs. It will be dangerous out there." Her eyes looked at them, seeming to ask for a second time if anybody wanted to stay.

Rowanpaw looked over at Emberheart and her two littermates, and he saw that Hazelfur had doubt in her eyes, but then shook it away. "We're your youngest warriors, are you sure you want us to go?" she asked, though her meow stayed strong.

Dawnstar gave a nod of understanding. "I understand your doubt,

but you being young is one of the main reasons I have chosen all of you. The older warriors are lacking hope and don't have the strength you all do. I need cats with the strength to travel so far," she explained. "If anybody asks, you are going on a normal patrol, but still go say goodbye to your families, tell them what you must, but try to keep the mission a secret."

Birchsplash stepped forward. "But, we're going to be gone for so long, how are you going to explain our absence?" he questioned the leader, but Emberheart answered.

"Dawnstar will tell the Clan about the mission tonight; she just wants to make sure no cat tries to come along." She looked at her leader for confirmation, and she nodded.

"Get going, all of you, before I think of something else to say," the she-cat let out a well-humored *mrrow*, and, after bidding her goodbye, the four cats left the shadowed corner.

"Rowanpaw, go and tell your friends and littermate goodbye, but remember what Dawnstar said," Emberheart murmured in his ear quietly, then hurried off with her littermates to where a group of warriors was settled, and it took only a few heartbeats to get there because the fight training had stopped.

Rowanpaw raced across the clearing to his friends, skidding to a stop beside his brother. Frondpaw had returned from the nursery, and she was drawing her paw over her ear. "Hey, so, Emberheart and I are going out on patrol, and I just wanted to say bye," he mewed quickly.

"A patrol? But you're a night hunter," Blazepaw meowed, looking up at the sky in confusion. The sun was still quite high, so Rowanpaw would have a long time before he and Emberheart usually went to find prey.

"A border patrol, I mean," the solid brown apprentice quickly fixed his words, but this made Blazepaw's eyes brighten, and he began to push himself to his paws.

"Can I come? I can ask Heronclaw--" Rowanpaw placed a paw on his

brother's back to push him back down.

"We have a full patrol, sorry." He looked over to where Emberheart, Hazelfur, and Birchsplash were talking to their mother, Clovertail, who was also the BatClan deputy and most likely knew where the patrol was heading off to.

"Oh, okay," Blazepaw sighed, his ears flattening.

"Ratpaw!" Emberheart called across the clearing. She was heading to the camp entrance.

"Coming!" he called over his shoulder, then looked back at his denmates. "Bye... I'll see you soon." He turned away from their confused gazes and raced to his mentor, not saying anything but instead climbing out of the camp and leaping down with hesitation, ignoring the feeling of the mud curling around his paws.

"Good leap," Hazelfur meowed as she landed next to him, with Emberheart on his other side. Keeping true to his name, when Birchsplash landed he sent a bit of wet soil into Hazelfur's face, and the pretty light brown she-cat shook it off. "Birchsplash!" she growled, and the tom bolted off, with the she-cat right behind his paws.

"Come on, faster we get away from camp, the better; fewer questions that way," Emberheart meowed then raced after her littermates. Rowanpaw licked his jaws before hurrying after them. It wasn't the easiest to bound through the trees, with the earth trying to pull him down, but he managed against it by taking high, powerful leaps, though that did cause him to sink deeper.

Even though soon Hazelfur and Birchsplash weren't chasing each other, the group continued at a run. Half the Clan was out hunting at the moment, and they needed to try their best not to get caught so they wouldn't have to make up more lies. Luckily, their camp wasn't too far from the Old Twolegplace, and their territory was quite small, so it seemed like no time before they were slowing, watching as the border fence loomed before them.

"Well, we got here quickly," Hazelfur panted, and Rowanpaw gave a

breathless nod, his sides heaving and his tail lying in the soil. Also on the good side, the ground was solid over here, so the boggy ground was behind them and he felt safe collapsing to his belly.

"I guess it's not a good idea to run hungry," Emberheart muttered, then followed Rowanpaw's example, getting down low and running her tongue over her whiskers.

"Look! The pond is right there!" Birchsplash rasped, lashing his tail in the direction that dark murky water was, only a few fox-lengths away.

"At least it's water," Hazelfur swallowed heavily, padding over and leaning down to lap at the surface. The other three followed her example, all of them deciding they needed to quench their thirst. The water was brown and tasted like grass and soil, but the cats drank without complaint. The water they usually had was the same as this; rainwater found in little dips in the ground.

They finished soon and went back to the area that was right next to the Old Thunderpath and the fence, silently agreeing to settle down and wait for a bit. "So, *Rowanpaw*, how's the adventure so far?" Hazelfur meowed after a while of silence, and Rowanpaw gave a start of surprise, whipping his head around to look at his mentor.

"You told them?" he mewed hoarsely, scared but also a little excited.

Emberheart nodded. "I told them when you were still a kit. Having more cats on your side will make it more likely Dawnstar will change your name when you become a warrior," she meowed. He stared at her gratefully but didn't get a chance to respond.

"Yeah, but Emberheart never told us *why* you wanted it changed. Sure, I wouldn't want to be called 'Rat' something for the rest of my life, but there has to be more than that," Birchsplash meowed, looking over at the brown apprentice, and Hazelfur added her yellow eyes to his coat.

"Well, my mother decided to name me Ratkit, while my brother Blazekit, and my sister Lavenderkit. And, not only that, when we

were one moon old she took my sister and abandoned the Clan and *us*, because she didn't want to starve but didn't want to leave her daughter alone, not even thinking about how her sons would feel," he growled sourly.

"Oh." Hazelfur looked around, her ears flat as she tried to make conversation. It was Emberheart who spoke.

"Rowanpaw wants his name to mean something, and Ratpaw isn't it. I still remember his first Gathering. He made a friend from EchoClan, Firepaw, I think his name was, but once he heard the name *Ratpaw* he started treating Rowanpaw just one; a rat. But he--" she cut herself off and looked at her apprentice, "--*you* are a good cat. I don't think you need to change your name to show that, but it is a rather horrible name." Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Thanks, Emberheart," Rowanpaw murmured, flicking his tail and averting his eyes. She always understood him, it seemed, even when it seemed impossible to the apprentice himself. The group rested a little more, the water having made their stomachs upset, but soon Birchsplash's belly began rumbling loud enough for everyone to hear.

The tom looked embarrassed, flattening his ears and lowering his head, but both the she-cats didn't seem to notice. "Let's get moving, shall we?" Emberheart slowly got to her paws. "Hopefully we'll find something to eat soon," she added.

"Please," the black-patched white tom murmured, looking up at the sky and closing his eyes. Emberheart groaned and rolled her head, then flicked her tail and started forward, with Hazelfur by her side and Rowanpaw walking next to Birchsplash.

"I still remember your mother," Birchsplash meowed suddenly, and Rowanpaw looked up quickly at him. Though, after a moment, he looked back down at his paws and focused on walking. "She was such a sweet cat, but after she found out she was having you and your littermates, she got really scared that something might happen."

"Nice to know she didn't want me," Rowanpaw muttered sourly, but

Birchsplash didn't seem to notice.

"When you three were born, she seemed to forget her fear at that moment, when she saw you for the first time. I was the apprentice assigned to get everything she needed, so I was in there a lot. She really did care about all of you, I know she did, no matter what you think." And with that, the warrior padded forward and became even with his sister Hazelfur, touching her flank with his tail to let her know he was there.

A heartbeat later, Emberheart stopped, and Rowanpaw looked forward to see that they had reached where the Old Thunderpath slipped through an opening of the fencing. The patrol waited for a moment, looking in at what they could see.

Rowanpaw had only been here once before, and his heart twisted with the thought of entering the broken place. The Thunderpath ran forward through the Twolegplace, with the ground cracked and uneven, with grass fighting to grow in some places, while it stretched high on each side.

"Stay safe and keep your eyes and ears open," Emberheart murmured, then flicked her tail and stepped onto the hard path in front of her. Birchsplash was next to follow, while Hazelfur and Rowanpaw stayed a bit behind, all four of their tails flicking uneasily. They stayed on the path as they walked, looking around at the Twoleg dens that had vines and moss growing up their sides, the entrances broke open and the insides dark and dusty.

Rowanpaw's eyes narrowed on a Twoleg nest that was crumbled on the ground, spilling out over the Old Thunderpath and blocking their way. "We could go around," Hazelfur suggested, looking at the other side of the path, but there was a Twoleg nest right up next to the Thunderpath, and a strange scent came from it.

"It smells like a fox, fresh, most likely," Birchsplash meowed, his ear flicking, and Rowanpaw swallowed and stepped away from the nest. He had never met a fox, but he knew they had killed many of his Clanmates in fights over food.

"It's not too high, we could climb," Emberheart meowed, looking at

the group, but they didn't disagree, so she flicked her tail and started up the heavy rocks. A few smaller pieces crumbled under her paws, but she continued without stopping.

This is gonna be fun, Rowanpaw thought, shaking out his fur, then he forced himself to follow his mentor. And, for a little moment, he wanted to go back to his friends. But the thought was pushed from his head when Birchsplash fell down back to the path, and Hazelfur followed after she laughed too hard at his tumble.

Sorry this chapter is a little rushed! I want to do Rowanpaw's story, but I was having some writer's block with him!

Question: What do you think of BatClan?

Chapter Six

Ravenpaw licked the leftover daisy leaves from his paws, his lips curling from the taste, and Berrywhisker cracked out a hoarse laugh. "You'll make a good medicine cat, one day!" the silver tabby laughed, ending it with a raspy cough.

"Are you okay?" His ears perked up, and he sniffed at the elder's face and felt her pad. He was tempted to touch noses with the old she-cat to see if he would get a vision but decided against it in fear of what he would see.

"I'm fine, just an old throat," the elder chuckled lightly, which sent her into another fit of coughs. Ravenpaw moved his head forward, wanting to help, but then it happened. The thing he feared, the thing he had just thought about. Berrywhisker turned her head towards him, and, even though his legs went stiff and he tried desperately to pull himself back, his nose touched the elder's, and he was washed away.

Instead of the rest of his dreams, Ravenpaw was seeing through Berrywhisker's eyes. He knew because he could see his—no, her—broken whiskers, and her graying silver paws. The elder's breath was labored, and her throat was as dry as dirt. It was crackled and burnt when she breathed, and he could feel the ripples going through his body.

Then, they both—apprentice and elder—saw it; a swirling mist right in front of their eyes. It began to form a whispering, uneven shape, then it was the perfect shape of a large, muscular tom. His fur was transparent and thick, with what seemed to be shining stars.

For a terrifying moment, Ravenpaw thought, Boulderclaw? *The tom, who was clearly a member of StarClan, looked identical to his father. Thick fur that was gray on the top, but his muzzle, chest and lower half of his body were a glowing white. But, truly, it was his eyes that caught the young apprentice's attention. They were a bright, glowing, memorizing green, with what seemed to be every shade of the forest inside them.*

Then, Berrywhisker spoke in a hoarse, crackled mew. "Chiveclaw? Is that you, my love?" She swallowed a cough. Ravenpaw could feel an awful feeling erupt in his chest. A longing so strong that if he had been standing he would've been knocked to his belly. It was like this tom, this "Chiveclaw" was her entire life, and she wasn't herself without him. Love, maybe?

It wasn't what Ravenpaw felt for his littermates or parents, but he knew love like that was different. This was a feeling of complete protection and need, with the heart-aching longing to smell his scent again or feel the warmth come from his body.

"Hello, my love," the tom's meow was soft but deep, full of love and a longing much like Berrywhisker's. "It is time for us to be together again," he murmured, blinking and moving closer.

"I've been waiting for so long," Berrywhisker rasped, her heart aching in despair when she realized she couldn't scent anything from her long-dead mate, or even feel a heat coming from his pelt. It was like he wasn't real, just some... illusion. Was that all StarClan was? Could they even be considered real, if they were nothing but mist?

Ravenpaw was once again terrified, but less by the thoughts, but more because they weren't his, they belonged to the dying elder, splayed out in her flattened nest. She was having these doubts about their ancestors...

"Once you join StarClan, you shall be able to smell me again." Chiveclaw had moved forward so he was close enough that his breath would've been able to ruffle his mate's whisker, but there was nothing coming from his muzzle. "Are you ready to join us, my love?"

"Yes." Berrywhisker didn't even hesitate. A feeling of sadness washed over the she-cat, and a picture formed in her mind. It was four small kits curled at her belly, with a strong feeling of love, but different than what she felt for Chiveclaw. Complete, utter love, but somehow a little different.

Ravenpaw knew who the kits were; Boulderclaw, Grayblaze, and Silverstrike, but as tiny little kits, and a fourth he didn't recognize. He couldn't believe he had forgotten something so amazing... Berrywhisker was his father's mother, his kin. And he didn't even remember until she

was gone...

Suddenly, his eyes were open, and he stared at Berrywhisker with wide, terrified eyes. "Ravenpaw, everything alright?" Berrywhisker asked softly.

"Oh, uh..." He couldn't find anything else to say. Had he really just watched this sweet elder die in her nest? "I-I have to go." Without waiting, he whipped around and charged from the elders' den, leaving the small pile of daisy leaves behind. He raced to the medicine cat's den and skidded inside onto the cool stone.

Mossrain, sniffing in the corner of the den, raised his head in surprise. "Ravenpaw, is everything okay?" the tom asked, getting up and hurrying over.

"I-I just ha-had another vision," he stammered, licking his jaws scaredly. Mossrain had learned about his visions the day Goldenpool had, and he trusted whatever Ravenpaw said about what he saw. "It was about Berrywhisker—she was dying! She was in her nest, and she could see Chiveclaw, and was talking to him and—" He was cut off.

"Wait, who's Chiveclaw?" the medicine cat asked, shaking his head in confusion.

"Berrywhisker's mate! Boulderclaw's father!" he mewled, scratching his claws over the stone. "How do you not know that?"

"Chiveclaw..." Mossrain's eyes cleared. "I never met him; he died when your father was still in apprenticeship, long before my time." The tom shook his head to clear it. "I don't think there's anything you can do about it. Berrywhisker is extremely old, she was already an elder when I was born, almost six seasons ago. Goldenpool said she expected poor Berrywhisker to pass the last leaf-bare, but she survived without a hint of illness. Sometimes, when it's time to go, it's time to go."

"What are you saying?" The apprentice felt scared but also angry. "Are you saying we should do nothing? Should we just let her die?" His ears flattened. "Aren't we supposed to help hurt cats?" his mew

turned into a sob, his emotions uncontrollable.

Surprisingly, Mossrain actually didn't speak, but instead moved forward and curled himself around his apprentice before sitting down next to him, their flanks brushing. "I know Ravenpaw, I know. I felt the same as you did when you were younger; I never thought I would let a cat die, but sometimes it's what StarClan plans. Don't you think Berrywhisker will be happier there, in a wonderful place where it's always greenleaf, prey never runs short, and she'll be young and healthy with her mate forever?"

"I..." He choked on his words and slid down to his stomach. His chest was twisted and burning, and his breathing was hard and hoarse. He had already known that some cats would die, but he didn't imagine it being like this... Then, suddenly, he forced himself up and swallowed heavily. "S-she's not gone yet, maybe I can save her. StarClan may think it's her time, but maybe she doesn't!"

Ravenpaw tottered out of the den on unsteady paws, ignoring the call from Willowpaw to come and join her to eat a mouse she had caught, and he went straight into the elder's den. Dappletail was gone, probably out in the clearing or taking a walk in the territory, but Berrywhisker, of course, was still in her nest, slowly dragging her paw over her ear with a labored breath.

"I was wondering when you were going to come back," the she-cat rasped, and he sat next to her, not really knowing what to say. But, then it formed.

"I wanted to know a bit about Chiveclaw... I heard a little bit about him from Boulderclaw, and it seemed that you loved him a lot." His tail flicked nervously.

He saw her eyes grow soft, and her whiskers twitched as memories flashed through her pale amber eyes. "Oh, Chiveclaw... There was no better warrior than he. He was deputy, too, you know. He served Dovestar for so long, and everybody thought he would become a great leader. But he cared about his Clan too much. A fox had killed a kit that had traveled out of camp. It was Frostfall's brother; he was so adventurous..." The she-cat broke off with a heavy coughing.

"I'm sorry to make you speak so much." Dread filled Ravenpaw of the thought that he might've been the reason Berrywhisker had given up, but the she-cat stopped him from leaving.

"No, Ravenpaw, please, stay," she reached out a soft paw to his. "You deserve to know a little more about our history."

"Okay, just stop if you start feeling, you know..." he trailed off and let her continue.

"When Chiveclaw found the kit, he got a patrol together and tracked down the fox. It turned out it had cubs, and the patrol was attacked and outnumbered. Chiveclaw told the patrol to run, that he would be right behind them, but when they looked back they saw... He had stayed behind to stop the foxes from following them to camp, to give them more time. When he was found... Oh, my poor love was torn to pieces..." She looked down at her paws.

"He... He sounds really brave," Ravenpaw whispered, then looked up. "Do you want to join him, in StarClan?" he mewed softly.

Berrywhisker seemed surprised by the question but only took a moment to answer. "Yes, I do. I would hate to leave my kits, and you and your littermates, but I miss Chiveclaw more than anything; you'll understand the feeling, young one when you fall in love. I have laid in this nest for too many moons to count. My legs can barely get me into a sit anymore, but in StarClan, I'll be young again, and I can run with my mate until the sun goes down..." her mew was so happy, so wistful...

So she wants to join StarClan... Ravenpaw felt sadness grow in him. But, he forced it away the best he could, which wasn't much but it got it his mind on a different topic. "Goodbye, Berrywhisker, I'll see you later." He looked at the she-cat over his shoulder before he left, then padded into the clearing and scented the air.

All sorts of smells surrounded him. *Oakcloud...Frostfall...Stonecoat, Shadefur... Maskdapple... Grayblaze and Silverstrike!* He looked around the clearing to where he could see Maskdapple blocking Silverstrike from his view, with Grayblaze not too far.

"Hey, Silverstrike!" he called when he was closer, and the silver and white tom raised his head.

"Hello, Ravenpaw. Is everything okay in the medicine cat's den?" The tom tilted his head.

"Yeah, but I thought it would be nice if you went and saw Berrywhisker. She seems a little sad and lonely, maybe she needs you, and Grayblaze." He nodded to the gruff gray tom, who shifted where he was laying but didn't make a move to stand.

"Thanks, Ravenpaw, I'll go check on her," the tom meowed gratefully, rising to his paws and giving Maskdapple's forehead a soft lick. "I'll be right back." He turned to Grayblaze. "Are you coming?"

"I'm good," the tom snorted, getting to his paws and giving his broad frame a shake, then he padded for the moor camp entrance. Silverstrike looked after him for a moment, then turned and headed for the elders' den.

Ravenpaw soon found his father sunning himself on the Rock Pile next the medicine cat's den, with Snowfern's spine pressed against his. "Hey," he mewled as he scrambled up, and his mother purred happily when he approached, rubbing her cheek against his.

"Why are you here, my little herb muddler?" she asked cheerfully. That was a little name she had adopted in the past few days, and he didn't really mind it; it made him feel better, actually. It showed his mother truly did care about what he was doing and didn't think it was wrong like Blossompaw.

"Silverstrike is visiting Berrywhisker because she's a little sad right now, and I thought you might want to join her," the apprentice meowed to his father, and his eyes lit with love.

"Thank you, Ravenpaw, I'll head right over." He rose to his powerful paws, his muscles rippling in his thick, long legs. "I'm guessing Grayblaze turned down the offer?" he added.

"Yeah, I think he went hunting," Ravenpaw mewed, scraping his

claws over the rock. What if Berrywhisker died before Grayblaze got the chance to say goodbye? Ravenpaw knew he'd never forgive himself if he missed the chance to say goodbye to his mother. Boulderclaw touched his nose to his son's head in goodbye, then leaped away and headed for the ferns.

Ravenpaw raised a paw to leave, but then he stared into his mother's eyes for a moment, and leaped towards her, tucking himself against her belly and hiding his head in between her legs. His ears flattened and his tail curled around one of his paws, and he pressed himself as tightly as he could into his mother.

"Ravenpaw, are you okay?" Snowfern didn't try to move her head away to see him better, but instead licked his cheek then rested her head near his. "Did something happen, young one?"

"I don't want to talk about it..." he muttered, pressing closer to her. He desperately wanted to tell her about his visions, to tell her about Berrywhisker, but he didn't want her to think of him as different. It was strange enough wanting to heal, but seeing visions? That wasn't right, and he couldn't lose his mother...

"You should sleep, my kit," Snowfern murmured, drawing her legs close and pulling her body up. "Come on, follow me." She nudged him to his paws when he didn't move and leaped down the Rock Pile onto the camp's ground. He followed, and when he straightened she laid her tail on his shoulders and led him towards the medicine cat's den. He had slept with his littermates for the first two days of his apprenticeship, then he moved into the medicine cat's den, into Goldenpool's old nest.

Snowfern led him to his nest, waiting for him to curl up, then she wrapped around herself around him. He sunk into her warm side, taking a deep whiff of her scent. It felt like moons since he had been cuddled into her side in the warm, milky nursery, and he wished he could go back to that moment, even for just a heartbeat. But, despite what Ravenpaw had seen, he found himself falling to sleep almost immediately.

At first, he didn't notice he was dreaming. Not until his mother's scent faded and the herb smell disappeared. Warm air fluttered through his

thin coat, and he opened his eyes to see that he was in a strange place with unfamiliar smells. He raised his head, looking around, and he noticed something immediately; a roaring in his ears, seeming to come from something big that wasn't far nor close.

"Ravenpaw."

The black tom whipped around, fur on end, to find a she-cat standing before him. She stood on tall, thin legs with a lithe body that was so transparent he could see the trees behind her, with what seemed like the entire Star Streak in her silver black-striped fur. Her eyes were large and a glowing forest-green, filled with the wisdom of many moons but also the youth of a young cat.

"I am Echo," she said when he didn't speak, twirling her tail around her paws as she sat with a straight back and a puffed chest. She looked powerful, despite her soft-looking pelt and kind gaze. "I was the first leader of your Clan."

"Uh..." He couldn't get anything else out. Hadn't he been told he would only meet Echo when he got his full name?

"Usually, yes, that's how it works," Echo meowed, then added, "and yes, I did read your mind. It comes with the ability to see through other's eyes, but it's not as easy as you would think," her mew filled with amusement. "Would you like to say something?"

"Um... Yeah..." He swallowed heavily. He... What... His mind wasn't working. He had too many thoughts going through his head to focus on even one; was this really Echo? If so, why was she here? What could be the point? Was he dying? Was she going to talk about his power? Why would the first leader of his Clan want to talk to him? "Why...are...you here?" It seemed almost impossible to get out the messy sentence.

The she-cat gave a pleasant chuckle. "Surely you can guess?" she asked.

"Because... Because of my visions?" he mewed quietly, ears flat, though he was finding his voice somehow. Was this real? Was the *Echo really visiting him? He knew almost nothing, but yet... To know he was alive just because she and three random cats decided to make Clans...*

"Partly," she meowed. "I have been quite sad that the Clans somehow have no idea of their history, and they will need someone to help them through the times that come ahead." The she-cat's eyes sparkled, and she stood, turning around. She called over her shoulder, "Come, follow."

She began to pad away, and Ravenpaw clawed at the grass anxiously, then stood and hurried after her. "What do you mean by that? What's happening in the future? And why did you give the visions to me? And why is there a prophecy about me?" he rushed.

Echo stopped and looked at him, her eyes flashing around as she thought. "The Clans have changed their view on how they were formed; the Clans will need help to fight an unbeatable enemy; you were chosen because of your heart; there's no prophecy about you." She turned and continued walking towards a misty forest Ravenpaw hadn't noticed before.

"Goldenpool said it was just a message, but surely it's close enough to a prophecy?" He was getting braver at talking to the she-cat, though he didn't really know why.

Echo slowed and looked at him again. Not in anger, or impatience or anything like that, but a feeling like sadness. "Ravenpaw, Goldenpool was lying to you. It was for the best; she was trying to get you confident in yourself, so you would try again and realize you are different than others."

He was quiet for a moment, looking down at his paws, then he mewled like a kit. "But I don't want to be different than others!" It almost turned into a yowl. Surprisingly, Echo didn't get angry like he thought she would but instead curled herself around him. He couldn't feel her coat, it felt like cool mist touching him, and he couldn't feel her warmth or breath.

"You are still a kit, Ravenpaw, despite your name and power. It is okay to get upset, but I want you to know you may be different, but they are still your Clanmates, littermates, friends. You are still a normal cat, but you can do something any cat would want; you can see the future, little parts of cats' lives to live, and, if you need to, change. You will need this power to help your Clan when it happens."

"When what happens?" he mewed, looking at her with wide yellow eyes.

She blinked once. "You are too young, Ravenpaw. You have to focus on your training, and if I tell you everything right now, it will make you confused and overload your body. I will visit you when I can and teach you about the past. This is all I can tell you, so think about it. This could seem like too much information or not enough, but it doesn't matter how you see it; to show you everything, it will take more than six moons, even if I visit you every night. There will always be more to show you, no matter how old you get."

"What do you mean show?" The she-cat stood and began walking away, but she stopped and looked back at his question.

"I am going to bring you back to when I was younger, back to before the Clans were born, when Twolegs still lived in their dens, when Clans were at peace..." she trailed off, then shook her head and looked at him. "Do you have any last questions? None about the past, though, I cannot overload you."

"Why me?" he asked instantly. He didn't really think about it, he just wanted—no, needed *to know. Why was he, a young useless apprentice scared of his shadow, chosen by the first leader of his Clan? She had even said he was too young, so why didn't she choose someone older, braver, stronger? Like his father.*

"Because you're heart is pure." Echo's gaze didn't waver. "If you can worry about the families of mice, of voles, then I know you will try to save every cat life, no matter who they are and where they come from. And before we know it, the Clans will need every ally they can get." The she-cat's form wavered, and when the apprentice blinked, she was gone.

But, he stayed, in this strange place he hadn't even really paid attention to. It was dark, with cool whispering air and misty trees. He looked around in circles, at the surrounding forest. He was in a clearing, with the moon bearing down at him at what seemed to be only fox-lengths above. It felt like he could leap and land among the stars.

"Ravenpaw." Another voice.

This time, he turned his head around normally, not so fast it hurt.

Standing there were two long-legged, muscular cats with transparent starry fur. He recognized the tom immediately; it was Chiveclaw, his father's father. But he wasn't sure about the she-cat pressed into his side. Then it clicked.

"Berrywhisker?" he mewed quietly, looking at her in scared surprise. She had died when he was sleeping, but she looked so different. She wasn't the old frail cat that couldn't even get up from her nest, but instead a young strong warrior with power shoulders and rippling muscles.

The previously-elder she-cat looked at her side, then back at him. "It was a shock to me too. But when we join StarClan, we become where we were in our happiest, most powerful moments. Normally, I would've been older, but this was the age I was when I still had Chiveclaw." She looked at the tom next to her, the pained love in her eyes as clear as water.

"I saw you die..." he whispered. He had thought it would've been farther in the future, not the same day... What if he had touched her nose right before she was going to die? Would he see her last moments, or maybe something from her past or from StarClan? The questions made his head spin, and the next thing he knew he was awake in his nest.

Chapter Seven

Rowanpaw stumbled down the other side of the pile of the destroyed den, jumping the last part to get over strange sparkling pebbles. Emberheart had already made it across the sparkling rocks, and she was licking her pad as it bled lightly. She hadn't jumped over them, and now she couldn't put her paw down without wincing.

"You okay?" Hazelfur landed next to Rowanpaw, while Birchsplash stumbled ahead and fell over, his chin hitting the ground with a heavy *thump!* and he groaned in pain. Hazelfur started to laugh, then stopped when she saw Emberheart still hurting.

"Should we head back?" Rowanpaw looked from she-cat to she-cat. Hazelfur looked like she was going to agree, but Emberheart shook her head quickly.

"No, we need to continue. It'll be healed soon enough." Emberheart shook out her paw and tried to move forward, but her leg collapsed under her when she put weight on it. She mewled in pain, raising her leg again. "I'll walk on three legs," she meowed and started limping forward.

"Emberheart, you can't go on. Let's head back, and we'll come back once you're healed," Hazelfur meowed, not moving from her spot. Her sister stopped, still holding her paw up, and shook her head firmly.

"I'm not going back." Her eyes were hard. "It's just a scratch. Can we please get going? The sun is already starting to go down, and we don't want to be out here when it gets dark; we don't know the Twolegplace yet."

Hazelfur sighed and looked ready to start arguing, but Birchsplash took a step forward, raising his head high. "Hazelfur, we know Emberheart won't turn back. Why don't we find someplace to settle down, and the three of us head out hunting?" The tom looked at

Hazelfur and Rowanpaw.

"Fine, I guess that'll work." Emberheart shifted on her three paws, licking her jaws and twitching her whiskers. "I guess it's the only choice." Her ear flicked and she snorted. It was clear she was grateful for the help but disliked being treated like a helpless kit.

"Come on, let's find somewhere safe. I'll help you walk," Birchsplash meowed, getting up and moving to Emberheart's side, letting her lean on his shoulder. She muttered some thanks, then they started forward at a slow walk.

"Rowanpaw, you go to one side of the road, I'll go to the other; look around for someplace to settle down safely," Hazelfur meowed to the apprentice, then headed for the right of Birchsplash.

"Okay!" His heart was starting to itch to explore, longing for the possibility to find any bit of prey. He hurried to the left and bounded down the hard crackled Thunderpath; it scratched his pads, which were soft from walking through his boggy territory. There were small places in between some of the Twoleg houses, which looked dark and murky and were filled with foul smells.

He checked back a few times to look at his mentor, then he continued searching. He past about three broken nests before he saw something that might work. He padded into the little pathway —which stopped at a solid barrier—and sniffed around at some hard shiny objects. They were cold to the touch but protected a little corner where Emberheart could be hidden.

"Hey! I think I found something!" It was Hazelfur.

Rowanpaw sniffed at his little area for a moment, then turned and bounded across the Old Thunderpath, his pads spiking with pain as he stepped over small pebbles. Hazelfur hadn't made it as far as him, so Emberheart and Birchsplash had already reached the pathway before he did.

Hazelfur was sniffing at the back side of the small pathway that connected to one of the Twoleg nests, where a small hole was made in the solid nest wall. "I haven't gone in yet, but it looks safe from

foxes and other cats. I can't smell anything inside." Hazelfur's tail flicked as her head disappeared into the hole. "Wow!" Her tail lashed again, and she suddenly disappeared completely.

"Hazelfur! Come back, we don't know if it's safe!" Birchsplash abandoned Emberheart behind him and quickly followed his other sister into the darkness.

"Great StarClan, you two are mouse-brains!" Emberheart growled, still holding up her paw, and she looked over at Rowanpaw. "Follow me," she meowed, then limped forward, awkwardly brought herself to the ground, and shuffled forward, slowly getting swallowed by the darkness.

Rowanpaw hesitated outside, clawing at the hard ground underneath him, then he forced himself forward, slinking down and wiggling after his mentor. The hole didn't go on for long; his head was through into the open when his shoulders were still outside. The den was dark and had a bad, sour scent, but other than that it seemed fine.

He slunk forward to his mentor and sniffed the air, straightening his legs. The air was thick and dusty, and his eyes burned from the dryness, causing him to constantly blink. Hazelfur and Birchsplash had disappeared, but he could hear their pawsteps somewhere in the fuzzy darkness.

"What is this place?" Rowanpaw muttered, and it echoed around the large place. His eyes started to adjust, and his jaw fell open in shock. It was huge! The top of the den stretched far above him, and the den was huge, with large strange rock-like things around. He moved forward and hesitantly jumped up on one, and he fell off in shock when he found it wasn't solid, but squished under his paws.

"Is everything okay?" Emberheart limped forward, sniffing at the strange rock.

"It's soft, like really really soft!" Rowanpaw jumped up again, and he dug his claws into the covering to keep himself from following. "I think I understand why Twolegs lived here," he added, crouching down and laying down on his side. It was nicer than any nest he

had ever slept in; it wasn't made from damp moss, or muddy bird feathers, or dry crackled ferns.

"Rowanpaw, get down from there," Emberheart's tone went hard, and he looked up to see her eyes were hard and icy.

His ears flattened in confusion, and he slid down back to the slick ground. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"We don't conspire with anything involving Twolegs," she meowed harshly. Rowanpaw flinched like he had been struck by a claw.

"*Conspire*? It's just a big nest!" he growled, his tail lashing. Why did Emberheart's mood change so quickly?

Suddenly, Emberheart seemed to deflate. Her eyes softened, and her ears drooped. "Rowanpaw, we've lost more than half our Clan because they choose to become rogues or find a Twoleg home. You're such a good cat, and we can't afford to lose any more warriors. I almost didn't bring you because I didn't want you tempted by, well, you know..." She flicked her tail and adverted her eyes.

"What?" Disbelief rose in the young tom's throat. He thought Emberheart trusted him... But she expected him to go running after his mother! "Why would you think I would desert my Clan?" he wailed like a kit.

Emberheart sighed, looking at him with hurt eyes. "Rowanpaw, don't even try to tell me you've never thought about it. You hate our territory, I know you want to get out of it and find someplace dryer with more prey," she meowed.

His back fur puffed up. "So? That doesn't mean I'm going to abandon my Clan! I've told you how much I hate my mother for leaving me; you really think I'm going to do the same?" he hissed, fear tingling in his spine. He hated the feeling of the truth beginning to come out. He *had* thought about leaving the Clan, too many times to count. But he couldn't, he had to help his friends and Ashbreeze... He couldn't leave, no matter how hard it got.

"What's going on in here?" Birchsplash and Hazelfur appeared from the shadows of the den, their bodies clearly saying they had heard everything but their eyes shining with fake confusion.

"Just a little disagreement," Emberheart answered, whether she knew what her littermates had heard or not unable to be read from her simple stiff words.

"Yup." Rowanpaw's tail lashed angrily. "Just a little disagreement," he growled, then added, "I'm going to look for something to eat," and left the den without saying anything else. He was a little sad that nobody called after him, but he shook it off and headed down the little pathway, emerging into the open.

The air was cooling, and the smallest bit of orange was streaking the sky. Shadows were stretching through the Twolegplace, and it made everything seem even bigger. Rowanpaw hesitated, but when Birchsplash's voice became louder—meaning he was leaving the den—he hurried on down the Thunderpath's side.

He kept his jaws open and ears perked, hoping to find even the smallest thing to eat. A morsel of a mouse, a scrap of crowfood—he'd eat anything edible in his current state. He continued down the path, sniffing around for a scent, but as he continued the air was taken over by a dry, tasteless scent, and the wild grass turned to crumpled brown patches.

The dens here were darkened and spilled out or collapsed on each other, with some giving out a sour scent that hurt his nose. It was too strong to leave it be, and he padded towards the closest den with the smell. This den was curled in on itself, blackened by a strange type of dust that was black and stuck to Rowanpaw's pads, and it hurt his scent glands to sniff it closely.

He had to jump around on thin tree trunks that were narrowed in some places, and one bounced under his weight. He dug his claws into the wood and found it soft and mushy, which made him run as quickly as he could to a clear patch of the area.

The sour scent was close, tucked under a fallen log in a strange solid object that was large and shiny white, with on side fallen

open. Underneath the scent, he could almost smell meat, but when he caught a look he saw that it was past crowfood—it couldn't be considered edible. It was shriveled and dark, surrounded by what might've been prey once but was know almost like dust.

His eyes were beginning to water from the scent of the crowfood, and he decided to quickly leave the rubble before he started gagging. The smell stayed with him but faded enough for his eyes to clear. He escaped from the collapsed den to see Birchsplash and Hazelfur not far from him at the den across the Thunderpath.

"Looks like soot," Birchsplash was commenting, pawing at a small piece of wood. "Must've been a pretty bad fire to smoke all the Twolegs away."

Rowanpaw slowly approached, and Hazelfur looked at him, but she didn't say anything and looked back at her brother. The apprentice recalled the memory of the elder Lakeshine telling him about the Twolegplace fire, but he couldn't remember the story.

"What happened, again? I forgot," he meowed, not looking at the two but instead at the row of dens. There were more he hadn't noticed until now; there seemed to be endless amounts of broken mounds going all the way into the darkened mountains far in the horizon.

"It was moons ago," Birchsplash replied quietly, getting into a sit. "Around when the Clans first formed. A horrible storm came, and the dens caught fire. It spread so quickly nobody could stop it. Our ancestors had to flee CrowClan and BatClan territory, and they stayed in EchoClan's forest; it was one reason our numbers are so low."

Hazelfur took up the story. "As its told, CrowClan and BatClan tried to stay in their territories, being too proud to run to another Clan for help. The smoke got so heavy many cats dropped, unable to breathe. We all finally ran and took shelter under EchoClan; they had the farthest territory, so it was the safest. The fire lasted a quarter moon, as Lakeshine said, and the Twolegs stopped it before it reached the territories, thank StarClan. A few came back, but after a few moons of them trying to rebuild they abandoned it,

leaving it too the kittypets left without homes to become rogues and loners."

Birchsplash nodded in agreement. "CrowClan and BatClan soon went back to their territories, but a few cats choose to stay in EchoClan; they enjoyed the forest and the moor. A few were from CrowClan, but most were from BatClan... They were tired of starving," he sighed.

"We were starving back then?" Rowanpaw looked surprised. He knew how much they were starving now, but back then as well? Even when the Clan had just started, cats were leaving... *I won't leave,* he told himself firmly. *I won't abandon anybody.*

"Sadly," Hazelfur answered, flicking her tail. "But we loved the pines, the marsh. We had it better then, we weren't as hungry as we are now... But we were still hungry. Cats starved to death or left or suffered. There were no other options. And we still have the same now..." The she-cat let out a heavy sigh.

The three cats fell into a silence, not awkward but not too comfortable. It was broken Birchsplash meowed, "You know why Emberheart was angry, don't you?" He looked at Rowanpaw.

"Because she doesn't trust me?" his mew became sour like the crowfood he had found.

"Because she's *scared*," Hazelfur responded, and he looked up at the two littermates. "Emberheart loves her Clan more than anything, and she's scared of losing any more cats. She's been friends with you since you were two moons old, and she knows you more than you may know yourself. You're a good cat, you're a smart cat, and you're a strong cat. She knows you'll be a great warrior one day, and she really needs that right now..." Hazelfur trailed off and looked at Birchsplash.

"What?" Rowanpaw asked, sensing something between them. "Why does she want warriors now, and not always?"

Birchsplash looked at him seriously. "Because she's expecting kits, Rowanpaw."

He froze. Emberheart was having kits? For a moment, his heart swelled with excitement, but then plummeted. "But, we don't have the prey..." His mind flashed to his mentor, and he remembered how easily he could count her ribs. "She's too skinny..."

"That's why we need more prey," Hazelfur meowed. "She won't eat, she's too stubborn to take prey before others. That's why Dawnstar choose her. So she might get to eat more, to help her kits grow. She's not too far in, but if she doesn't get more prey, her kits won't make it."

Rowanpaw looked down. He felt awful... He was so rude to his mentor, while she was carrying kits inside her narrowed belly. "Who's the father?" he asked after a moment, though he was sure he knew the answer.

"Heronclaw," Birchsplash confirmed his thoughts. Heronclaw was the closest to the three littermate's age but was still quite older. He would've already been a warrior by the time Emberheart was born, but that didn't matter. They were both still young, both still strong, and they were bringing more kits into the Clan. Even though it was a starving one...

He remembered the kittish-promise to Ashbreeze to protect her kits, and now he knew he would have more to watch, and another job. Emberheart would definitely choose him as her helper for her kits, and that meant he would be doing absolutely anything he possibly could for them.

I'll be the first to be responsible for their lives...

Sorry this chapter is late! I'm hoping to post a chapter every Saturday, but Wattpad was being a little weird and not letting me write, and I was having writer's block! I'm not going to be posting this Saturday, just because it's only two days away, but I'll hopefully be able to get back to regular posting on the 24th!

Question #1: Do you enjoy Rowanpaw's story?

Question #2: Do you like that Emberheart is having kits, or is it too cliche?

Chapter Eight

"It seems wrong..." Willowpaw whispered softly, staring over at Berrywhisker's limp body with misty eyes. Ravenpaw nodded in silent agreement with his sister. When he had awoken from his dream he expected the skies to be crying for the loss of the elder, but instead, the air was warm and the sun was bright as it disappeared into the trees. The wind was soft and twisting his fur, filling his lungs to the point he felt as light as air.

But his heavy heart kept him down. He felt awful about losing Berrywhisker, but after seeing her in StarClan, happy and with her mate, he knew she would love it more there. It was his father that troubled him. Boulderclaw and Silverstrike had been with Berrywhisker when she died, and afterward, Ravenpaw's father disappeared into the forest and hasn't returned. His mother was currently out looking for him.

"She was amazing," he heard a cat murmur and looked up to see Silverstrike standing next to Grayblaze. The large gray tom hadn't spoken since he got back from a hunt to find his mother had passed to StarClan, though it was clear he was angry with himself. He had denied going to see his mother and hadn't been there when she passed.

It was his choice, Ravenpaw thought direly, and immediately felt bad about it. Grayblaze hadn't known, only Ravenpaw did; it was his fault. He should've tried harder with the senior warrior and not given up after one try.

"How are you?" a mew said above him, and he looked up to see Featherpaw standing there, her eyes soft and curious. She sat gracefully, her tail curling around her dark paws. "I remember losing a kin member — my mother's sister," she added after Ravenpaw tilted his head. "She was really nice and played with me often. She died when you were maybe a moon old."

"Oh... I'm sorry." Ravenpaw looked at his paws, growling at himself

for being so awkward. Why couldn't have a normal conversation without making someone feel sad? It was like a curse. She was only eight moons old, but she always seemed so calm and collected, almost like an older warrior.

"It's fine," Featherpaw mewed, blinking softly. "I miss her, but she's in StarClan, and I know she's enjoying herself; being forever young, never running out of energy, watching over her Clan for moons upon moons..." The dark red tabby's eyes glowed with memories.

Ravenpaw stayed quiet, and Featherpaw bid him goodbye with a nod of her head, then she stood and walked away, flicking her tail happily. He was tempted to call her back to ask her to stay with him but shook it away when he saw his mother appearing from the camp entrance, jumping up from the rocky pathway that led down to the forest.

He jumped up and hurried over, sensing her fear before he even got close. "Where's Boulderclaw?" he mewed, stopping in front of her, and his mother sighed, dropping her head and shaking it side from side.

"I found him by the river, but he wanted to be alone. I know he wants some peace and quiet to think things over." Her eyes sparkled with sadness. "He was so young when his father died, but he was the same back then; he always wanted to be alone to mourn."

Ravenpaw looked down at his paws. He always knew his father to be such a brave, courageous, wise warrior, and he wondered how he hadn't thought of this before. He had never thought about his father getting sad or mournful, it had always seemed impossible. *I guess even the strongest can feel weak sometimes,* he thought and looked up at his mother.

"Will he come back?" Fear filled his body with the thought of Boulderclaw staying overnight in the forest, alone in the cold where enemies could be lurking.

"Oh, of course," Snowfern answered immediately, moving forward and brushing her cheek against her son's. "He'll be back soon, I promise. He just deals with his grief alone, but he'll return for the

vigil."

"Okay." Ravenpaw felt a little better, but he was still slightly anxious. "Should I be at the vigil, too?" He wanted to be with Berrywhisker to say goodbye, but the day had gone so fast his head was spinning. Berrywhisker dying, the visit from Echo... It was almost nothing, but yet too overwhelming.

"You should sleep," Snowfern replied instantly. "Berrywhisker will understand you missing her vigil. She may be your kin, but you've had a long enough day. So you head along and find Mossrain; I'm sure he'll have something to do for you. Then I want you to sleep, and if you wake up you can come and join us." She touched her nose to his.

"Will you wake me when Boulderclaw comes back?" he asked, the thought of sleeping suddenly making him tired. Snowfern nodded, her eyes growing soft, and she licked his forehead then nudged him away, purring from deep in her chest. He mewed a goodbye then headed across the clearing, eying Berrywhisker's body sadly, then slipped into the medicine cat's den.

"How are you, Ravenpaw?" Mossrain was sitting near the herb storage, looking sad but still sorting through the leaves and berries. "I know it's hard to lose someone close to you, and I know it's hard about having your visions, but I know they'll help cats in the future, not just show you when they're going to die. I mean, it may happen again, showing you cats dying, but I'm sure you'll be able to stop it that time. But of course, there's still the possibility—"

Ravenpaw cut his mentor off. "Thanks, Mossrain. Is it okay if I rest a bit? It's been a long day," he meowed, and his mentor nodded briskly.

"Of course, you're a young cat, after all! Do you want me to wake you later, before moonhigh so you can mourn? Do you want me to bring you something to eat? It's always good to eat something after sleeping, to get your strength up. Oh, and I also wanted to go through a few more herbs, and maybe head out and gather some tomorrow," the tom rambled.

"Yeah, going out tomorrow sounds nice," Ravenpaw meowed, even though his mentor continued speaking and didn't realize his apprentice slinking off to the small dip in the far back corner, where two nests were pressed close together. He curled up in the smaller one, taking in the scents around him.

In his small time as a medicine cat apprentice, he had come to love the smells of all the herbs and such. Their mingling scents filled his nose and slowly separated. Sweet, sour, dull, strong... He even recognized a few. Catmint, marigold, tansy — their scents were the strongest and stood out the most. Even though he could recall the names, the uses were gone. He continued to think about the different scents until he fell into a deep sleep.

The air thinned, and forest smells came to his nose.

"Ravenpaw," a meow said.

He blinked open his eyes. He was in a forest, with pale dawn light shining down into his eyes, and the misty shape of Echo stood before him. She was standing tall on her sturdy legs, and her green eyes were glowing. "Echo?" Why had the she-cat come so soon? He had expected her to disappear for a few nights at least.

"Soon enough I will only visit maybe twice in a quarter moon, but our last visit was rather short, don't you think?" her mew filled with amusement. "Follow me, and we can start from the beginning," she meowed, turning away and heading for a patch of brambles.

"O-okay." He scrambled to his paws and hurried after the she-cat, his fur prickling uncomfortably.

"We will begin at a time before I was born. With my mother and father," she meowed, walking towards the brambles, but before she reached them the air swirled into a thick fog. He hesitated, but when Echo started to disappear through it, he hurried after her and jumped through.

The dense forest disappeared, giving way to a flat grassy land with trees dotted around, with dusklight shining through the branches and bouncing off a tall thick barrier. "What is that?" he meowed, looking over at the great height.

"It's the fence blocking the Twoleg gardens from this woodland, which someday will be known as CrowClan's territory. Everything in between the fence, the Thunderpath, and a Twoleg walking path is theirs. But currently, this is a land for loners and kittypets to come hunt and enjoy themselves. The territory consists of a moor over that way—" she flicked her tail down a slight slope, and Ravenpaw looked to see the trees thinning until it was just an empty stretch of grass. "—and this woodland. Many different cats gather here during the warmer days to sleep on the Sun Rocks." She nodded her head behind him.

He looked around to see, only a few fox-lengths off, an outcrop of flat rocks with the dulling light sparkling off the surface. "It looks comfortable," he muttered, remembering the Rock Pile in his camp that served a warm resting place during the time the sun was highest and warmest.

"Yes, they are much alike," Echo agreed, sending a chill down the apprentice's spine.

"Can... Can you not do that?" he mewed, not comfortable with the thought of the she-cat's mind prodding his memories and thoughts.

"I'll try my best," Echo replied with a humourous mrrow then turned her attention to the Twoleg fence, where two cats had just appeared, and they jumped down into the grass. One was a large, muscular thick-furred tom with jet black fur, except for his paws, tail tip, throat, muzzle, and chest—those were a sparkling white.

The cat next to him was smaller, with long thin legs and a narrow face. Her coat was thin and silver, with pale tabby stripes lining her back and sides. The lower part of her body was white, and she reminded Ravenpaw of someone. It took a moment for him to realize that she looked much like Echo, except the StarClan cat's tabby stripes were thick and black.

"Are they... your parents?" Ravenpaw asked quietly, scared the cats would hear him, but they didn't even turn their heads, they just stood there, talking quietly about their own subject, and he heard snippets of the conversation.

"—are you sure your okay?"

" —Stop worrying about me —"

"Yes, they are my parents," Echo replied, her meow not lowering, but once again, the two cats didn't notice. "But for now, shush. We will follow them, and you may speak again once we are done, understand?" She looked down at him.

He opened his jaws to respond, but, thinking quickly, he shut his muzzle together and nodded briskly. The she-cat flicked his flank with her tail, then turned and headed for the cats, getting close enough they could be heard clearly.

"There's a small den made in the roots of a tree not far, you can rest there and I'll find you something to eat," the tom was meowing, his tone deep and powerful.

The she-cat replied in a delicate, smooth mew that sounded not much different than Echo's. "Whatever you think is best, Bat."

Bat? *Ravenpaw's head ringed with confusion, and he desperately wanted to talk, though he kept quiet, and Echo seemed to take pity on him, or it was part of her plan all along.*

"Yes, Ravenpaw, Bat, as in BatClan, is my father. I told you, the story changed quite a bit," her tone became quiet like her mother's, almost like sadness. She turned back to the cats and began to follow as they headed away, letting Ravenpaw notice the she-cat's belly was bulging with unborn kits.

"Sage, are you sure you're okay?" Bat asked, causing Ravenpaw to stumble, though he continued after them.

Sage? *How could the Clans be so wrong about the past? The Clans weren't made from random loners, but a family; Sage for SageClan, Bat for BatClan, Echo for EchoClan, and Ravenpaw guessed her littermate's name would be Crow. He looked over at Echo, but she didn't speak, so he stayed quiet.*

"Besides your nagging, I'm fine," Sage's mew was full of amusement, but also some fatigue.

Bat was quiet for a moment before responding. "Sage, you should've

kitted days ago," Bat meowed. "I want to make sure the kits will be safe," his meow was edged with worry.

Sage let out a mrrow *of laughter. "They're fine, Bat, stop worrying. The Twoleg vet said all four were perfectly healthy."*

"My mother was born a kittypet," Echo explained quietly. "She lived with her Twoleg until just tonight when she and Bat found out their kits would be given away."

"They take kits from their mothers?" Ravenpaw couldn't help but gasp. Echo didn't answer, didn't even look down at him, and continued following her long-dead parents. The young apprentice couldn't think of anything worse, to be ripped away from his mother and father and to never see them again.

Suddenly, Bat and Sage began to fade, and the woodland around him disappeared and returned him to the forest he had originally appeared in. "That is all for tonight, I do not want to overload your brain. You may ask questions now."

"The makers of the Clan were your kin? Why did the story change? How does Sage know how Twolegs talk? And do they really take kits away from their mothers?" he rushed out.

Echo's eyes whispered something for a moment, then she answered. "Yes, they are my kin; that is a question that can only properly be answered by the living, though my knowledge is that it changed over so many moons; Sage was very close with her Twoleg and learned some of their talk; and yes, kits do get taken away from their mothers. It's a sad thing, but all Twolegs do it. Anything else?"

"Uh..." For some reason, he hadn't expected true answers. "When will you, um, visit me next?"

"Hopefully soon," Echo replied instantly, her shape and the forest around her beginning to fade. "But for now, focus on your apprenticeship, you will need it for what comes next. Stay close to your friends and family, and remember to take care of all around you." She was gone in a blink of his eyes.

Ravenpaw woke in his nest soon after, and he saw pale moonlight shining in his fuzzy vision. He stretched, yawning, groaning at the relief of his stiff muscles. For a moment, his head was clear and free of any bad thought, but the past days came back to him, and he suddenly felt heavy and limp.

She wanted to die, he told himself, and found safety in the words, though his heart was tight with an anxiety for his father. Had he returned yet? Snowfern said she would wake him when he did, so did that mean his father was still away? Scrambling from his nest, Ravenpaw hurried from the silent den and into the clearing.

The moon shined down on a circle of cats in the middle of the open space, crouched against the ground in complete silence for the vigil. Ravenpaw went over, and a few cats raised their heads, including Silverstrike and Willowpaw, but they said nothing. He stood next to his sister and looked at the small, limp body of Berrywhisker.

This wasn't the she-cat he saw in StarClan. Her silver tabby coat was dull and messy, the markings faded and her face dark and expressionless. Her eyes were closed and her whiskers were limp, while her legs and tail had been tucked into her belly like she was sleeping. Her muzzle was pale and gray, and her paws were lightened with age. Her body was small and thin, with the muscles from her younger moons softened like a kit's.

He remembered the beautiful she-cat he had seen in StarClan; rippling tabby stripes with a clean, brushed coat, her whiskers twitching with excitement and her eyes shining. Her eyes a bright glowing amber, her legs strong and muscular. Her shoulders broad and powerful, her coat stripped of gray marks of age.

I would rather be there, too, Ravenpaw thought to himself sadly. He would want to be with his kin, right next to them, but to be living how Berrywhisker was sounded awful...

Suddenly, a scent caught Ravenpaw's nose, and he looked at the Rock Pile to see that Boulderclaw and Snowfern were there, on the flat rocks and pressed together. He quickly went over, jumping up quietly to his parents. Snowfern looked at him with sad eyes, while Boulderclaw's stared sightlessly at the ground.

"I'll leave you two alone," Snowfern whispered, licking her mate's cheek before slipping away, touching Ravenpaw shoulder with her tail. Ravenpaw watched her go, then settled next to his father.

"Don't you want to be near her?" he asked after a moment, his tone soft. Boulderclaw didn't even twitch his whiskers. Ravenpaw went silent for a few moments, wanting the air to loosen before he spoke again. "I saw her in my dream," he said finally.

Boulderclaw didn't look up, but Ravenpaw spied his whiskers twitching, and his eyes flashed. Ravenpaw continued.

"She visited me in StarClan, with Chiveclaw." Mentioning Boulderclaw's father caused the tom to turn his head so he could see his son's face. "She was young, and powerful and really happy. She was upset to leave you, but in StarClan she could run and hunt again next to her mate, what she had wanted for so long."

He could tell Boulderclaw was considering that he was lying. It hurt, but he knew it wasn't a hard thought. His father was upset, and he didn't want to get his hopes up, even with the son he knew didn't have the heart to withhold the truth.

"He looks a lot like you," Ravenpaw decided to add, and that got his father's attention. Boulderclaw raised his head and looked his son right in the eyes. "His fur is a little darker, but the eyes are the same. I can still remember the look Chiveclaw and Berrywhisker gave each other. Just pure happiness."

Boulderclaw looked down at his large flat paws once again, his ears flattening. Ravenpaw was suddenly terrified of the thought he had done something wrong, then his father's tail curled around his side. "Thank you, Ravenpaw," he whispered. Feeling his heart melt at his father's low, depressing meow, Ravenpaw brought himself closer to his father's side, and relaxed next to him, sinking into Boulderclaw's muscular frame.

Even though he had just slept, being so close to his father caused him to get drowsy, and before he knew it his eyes were closing.

Question #1: Did you like the first look into the past?

Question #2: How do you like Ravenpaw's relationship with his parents?

Chapter Nine

Rowanpaw stared into the black heap of an old Twoleg den. His pads were burning from the heavy amount of old soot under him, and he stretched his claws uncomfortably. The scent alone caused his muzzle to turn and made his eyes water, but the faint smell of a mouse persuaded him forward.

He looked back at the Thunderpath and watched Birchsplash and Hazelfur sniffing around at another den. Their pelts were darkened with the ash in the air, and they both looked tired and hard of breathing. He gave a quiet hiss to call them, and both warriors raised her heads. He jerked his own head in the direction of the den, and they both hurried over on quiet paws.

Birchsplash opened his mouth as he came close, and hunger shined in his gaze. "Mouse..." he whispered. Hazelfur came up next to him, and they flicked their ears, signaled with their tails, and slunk off to hunt. Rowanpaw, knowing he would be no use in hunting, settled down to wait. He had only successfully hunted twice in his entire apprenticeship; an old mouse, and a grounded wren.

He waited and watched the dusty sky as the sun lowered closer and closer to the mountain peaks in the distance, and his heart twisted with the fear of being in the Twoleg Place at night. He looked down the Thunderpath at the mass of an old Twoleg den, the pile where Emberheart had hurt her pad.

It was so close, he could just run right back home and curl up next to his brother, but he also was ecstatic about getting out the murky territory he had been forced to live in. He recalled all the times he had looked at the territories of the other Clans and wished he lived there instead. He could imagine the forest; hard ground, whispering leaves, sweet-smelling ferns...

But the moor as well, he added. The solid earth, the powerful winds, the sloping hills... *Why did I have to be born in BatClan?* He thought, his tail twitching. Yes, he loved his Clan, and he wanted to help

them, but he wanted to hunt, he wanted to fight, he wanted to enjoy everything and not just barely survive each day. If he had been born in another Clan, EchoClan, maybe, he wouldn't even think twice about his Clan starving in the shadows.

He suddenly heard a sharp *mrrow* of excitement, and he looked up to see Hazelfur and Birchsplash appearing, each with a small mouse in their jaws. "You caught *two* mice?" He stood up quickly, moving forward and sniffing to make sure he wasn't just seeing things. Birchsplash let out a bright purr.

"Yep! They got caught in the rubble and couldn't run away," his mew was muffled by the prey, which Rowanpaw now noticed was stained black, and his muzzle curled.

"Can we eat them with the soot on their fur like that?" he asked, and Birchsplash shrugged, reaching his head forward, and the apprentice understood immediately and took the mouse into his own jaws. His mouth watered from the warm blood that leaked onto his tongue, though the ashy taste of the fur burnt his throat.

"Hopefully," the tom sighed, flicking his tail. "Let's head back to the den. We'll share one mouse, and force Emberheart to eat the other." Amusement shined in his eyes. Hazelfur rolled her eyes, then she turned and trotted off to the den. The two toms followed, and they found themselves in the den in almost no time. There was definitely more prey here than in their territory, but the Clan was sick enough and the soot was awful.

Emberheart had been sleeping, curled up with her tail covering her muzzle, but she must've scented their return, for she raised her head with sleep clouding her gaze. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw their haul. "Two mice? Really?" She struggled up and held her injured paw off the ground.

"This one is for you," Rowanpaw murmured, dropping the mouse at her paws then turning away, and he sat down heavily with his back towards her. He could feel the hurt waving from her, and his heart ached to run back to his friend, but he was also still furious that she kept it from him still.

"You all should eat first," Emberheart began, making it clear she was ready to argue, but Birchsplash stopped her.

"No, Emberheart. We all agreed you got that mouse. Don't even try it." He nodded to Hazelfur and they made their way to the den entrance. But, when Rowanpaw tried to follow, the tom held up his tail to stop him. "We aren't going any farther until you two talk." His eyes were unreadable, and he stared at the apprentice for a few moments before following after his sister.

Rowanpaw lashed his tail, angry with the tom, but he went over and crouched down, facing Emberheart. She was picking at the mouse, but when she saw him, she nudged the mouse towards him. "Here, you eat. Take it as an apology. I should have never snapped at you earlier."

He stared at her with icy eyes. "I already ate today. So eat." He rolled it back to her with a paw, and she sighed, her eyes lowering, and she took a bite. She tried to look upset, but it was clear the mouse, no matter how soot-stained, tasted amazing.

"I've been waiting for what seems like forever to tell you this, and I've been waiting for the right time," Emberheart began, looking up from the kill. "But I guess I can't find it. So, I'll tell you now. A few days ago, I found out I was expecting kits."

He stared at her with hard eyes. "You've been waiting for the right time, yet you tell me when you're in the middle of a journey? After you screeched about me wanting to leave the Clan?" he hissed.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Rowanpaw, did you know?" Her gaze flickered to the entrance, and she let out a big sigh, dropping her head. "Mouse-brains! I needed to be the one to tell you!"

"Well sorry you didn't get the chance," he couldn't stop the scorn from coming into his mew. He was angry with his mentor, but the look in her eyes made his heart twist in pain.

"Rowanpaw, I'm so sorry! I wanted to tell you, but I..." her meow broke, and the desperate look in her gaze faded slightly. "But I knew I would have to stop being your mentor, and I thought you

would be mad about that. Pretty soon I'll have to be in the nursery, and after that, you'll get someone else to mentor you for the rest of your apprenticeship..." She looked like a kit, small and helpless.

"You really like I care about that?" Anger and sadness started conflicting in his mind. He was angry at her, but he still loved her like a sister. "You should've told me so I could help you! If you don't start eating more those kits will starve to death!" His tail lashed.

Emberheart didn't raise her meow, but kept it quiet, like a whisper. "Would that really be a bad thing?" Her eyes were wide and glimmering with sadness. "Would it really be bad if I lost the kits? Stopped them before they could come into his awful world of starvation?"

"Stop!" he hissed, ears flattening. She looked at him with hurt still in her eyes. "You don't mean that. So stop it."

"I know..." She dropped her muzzle onto her paws. "But what world am I bringing them into? What have I sentenced them to? Slow starvation? And with leaf-bare coming..."

"They'll be fine," his mew turned soft. All the anger he felt faded as his fear got bigger. These kits would be barely two moons old when leaf-bare started, and they would need constant prey to keep them going. All not only would there be Emberheart's kits, but Ashbreeze's as well. "I'll hunt day and night for them. Everyone will."

She didn't answer but instead finished off the mouse without complaining, then she curled herself up tightly and hid her face. Feeling helpless in her fight with hunger, he got up and curled up next to her side, hoping his heat would help her through the night. The air in the Twoleg den was dry and chilled, though it did stop the wind.

"Rowanpaw?" the she-cat murmured, not moving from her spot.

"Yeah?"

"Will you be my nursing helper?"

He let out a snort of amusement, his head still turned away from her's. "You really have to ask me that? No matter what happens, I'll always help you with anything you ask. I love you, Emberheart, and you'll always know why."

"I love you, too, Rowanpaw," Emberheart responded immediately.

"Like a brother?" he meowed with amusement, remembering earlier moons.

She purred. "Like a brother."

"Sorry we ate the entire mouse," Birchsplash apologized again as they padded deeper into the Twoleg Place. Emberheart snorted, still limping, and shook her head.

"I'm sure you are, Birchsplash, but it's too late now." She cast Rowanpaw a playful glance, and he flicked his tail, letting out a light purr.

"I already ate yesterday anyways." He looked over at Birchsplash. The white on the tom's fur was stained a dirty gray, and he kept on coughing to clear his throat. *That's what you get for drinking black water,* he thought with a small purr. "You should've waited," he meowed. They still hadn't found more water, but it was clear the tom regretted trying to quench his thirst.

"I realized," the tom replied, sniffling, and his tail lashed, though it seemed heavy. "This place is awful."

"The prey seems better than the territory's," Hazelfur commented, and Emberheart shrugged as she continued limping forward.

"Yeah, but it was only two mice. It could've been a lucky break, and besides, the air is too thick here for us to go any farther than this if we want to make it back safely."

"Does that mean we should head back?" Rowanpaw asked. "If there's no reason to go any farther?"

"We've barely been gone a day," Birchsplash meowed hoarsely, "so

we should probably go on a little bit to see if we can find anything. But this journey will most likely be cut short."

"I agree. And we only stopped so I could rest my paw," Emberheart replied. "So if I didn't get hurt we would've gotten here quite a while ago. We should go on for a few more days and, like Birchsplash said, try to find something worth the adventure."

"You mean worth walking through all this for?" Rowanpaw meowed, pausing for a moment to look at one of his pads. His paws were stained black and his pads were raw and burning from the soot coating the ground. "How long ago was this fire again?"

"Countless moons," Hazelfur answered.

"Then how is all the soot left?" he grumbled, shaking his paw and hurrying to catch up to the warriors.

"The rain washed it into the ground, I think," Hazelfur meowed, and Emberheart nodded in agreement.

"Well, it's stupid," Rowanpaw grunted, licking his muzzle, and he coughed when ash layered on his tongue.

"I agree, Rowanpaw," Emberheart muttered. "But we need to help our Clan."

"I know," he answered quietly. *I know. But it's still stupid.*

Great StarClan! What is wrong with me??? I'm having such a hard time with Rowanpaw right now and I don't know why. This chapter is almost a week late and really short and the writing is horrid. I'll try to make the next chapter extra long. It won't come out until the Saturday after this one, though it is halfway done already, because when I couldn't write in this one I would use write in the other for inspiration. Hopefully, I'll finish that one and work on future ones, so Chapter Eleven will be ready a few days before it needs to be published, then I'll be ahead of schedule.

Question: When Rowanpaw said, "I love you, Emberheart, and

you'll always know why" what do you think he may have been re***fur***ring to? Give your wildest guesses. (I apologize for that awful pun)

Warriors: In Depth(A/N)

So, after my last chapter was so late I thought of doing something I planned from the beginning; to give you more information about the main characters and side characters. I want you all to feel more connected to each of the cats. I'll let you know their personalities and their body shape and their coat details.

If there are any characters that you want to know more about that aren't in here, tell me in the comments and I'll put it at the end of the next chapter! I also plan to make an updated Allegiances, which will probably come up next week with Chapter Eleven. Just to add, Chapter Ten should be still coming up this Saturday.

Also, in other news, I'm writing another book! It ties in with this one, but I explain it there so go read it! It's called Morning Echo. You can decide if you want to read it or not, but I would at least read the Author's Note so you know what it's about.

Ravenpaw

Body Shape:
Small lithe body with long thin legs, long tail, narrow neck, small paws with thick hard pads, small shoulders, long body; roundish head with narrow cheeks, high cheekbones, and large round eyes
Coat And Eyes:
Jet black short dense fur, owl-like yellow eyes with a sharp gaze, black nose, and dark short whiskers
Personality:
Pros: caring, thoughtful, quiet, sensitive, careful, diligent,
Cons: skittish, jumpy, anxious, nervous, fidgety,
Kin:
Mother is Snowfern; father is Boulderclaw; brothers are Jaypaw, Stonecoat, Shadefur; sisters are Willowpaw, Blossompaw;

grandmother is Berrywhisker; uncles are Grayblaze, Silverstrike; aunt is Maskdapple; cousins are Brightpaw, Petalpaw, Pebblepeak, Mossrain

Backstory:

Born in Newleaf, Ravenpaw luckily didn't lose any of his three littermates and had many denmates, including the three kits of Maskdapple for two moons, one of who didn't survive; and Russetdawn and her three kits for four moons. Growing up, he was very close with all his littermates but found himself left out when they play fought or pretended to hunt. Surprisingly, Blossompaw was usually the one to comfort him when they were younger and they were very close but grew apart as they got older. He loves all his littermates equally, even with Blossompaw's blowout, and cares deeply for his parents and Mossrain. He also has a deep connection with Stormkit, with her being the first cat that he saved.

Blossompaw

Body Shape:

Strong build, long sturdy legs, big flat paws with hard pads, long sharp curled claws, long tail, short body length, broad shoulders and haunches, large chest, long neck, narrow face

Coat And Eyes:

Fur is mostly white but starting at her face she has light gray fur that is around her eyes, narrows at her ears, then spreads out and covers her back until the beginning of her tail; beautiful dark green eyes, bright pink nose, long white whiskers

Personality:

Pros: sensitive, loves her brother, and um... brave?
Cons: impulsive, proud, forthright, careless, foolhardy, hotheaded, ill-advised, misguided, rebellious,

Kin:

Mother is Snowfern; father is Boulderclaw; brothers are Jaypaw, Ravenpaw Stonecoat, Shadefur; sister is Willowpaw; grandmother is Berrywhisker; uncles are Grayblaze, Silverstrike; aunt is Maskdapple; cousins are Brightpaw, Petalpaw, Pebblepeak, Mossrain

Backstory:

From a young age, Blossompaw loved Ravenpaw more than anything. He was so nice and surprisingly adventurous for who he

is now. But he didn't like playing fighting or play hunting, so he usually sat out and watched Clan life. She always felt bad, so Blossompaw found herself talking to her brother instead of playing for much of the day. But as they grew older Blossompaw started to feel like Ravenpaw was more loved than she was, so she began focusing on her skills instead of staying with her brother. This caused a divide between the two that was never healed, and she felt betrayed when he didn't become a normal apprentice with her because she was scared they would never rekindle their bond.

Mossrain

Body Shape:
Small body, soft muscles, large flat paws with hard pads, long study legs, long tail, broad shoulders, short body length,
Coat And Eyes:
Solid gray fur broke only by a white patch covering his right eye and ear(if you're looking straight at him), bright hazel eyes, pink nose, long dark whiskers
Personality:
Pros: caring, talkative(Is this a pro or con?), understanding,
Cons: talkative, forgetful, clumsy,
Kin:
Mother is Maskdapple; father is Silverstrike; brothers are Pebblepeak, Petalpaw; sister is Brightpaw; uncles are Grayblaze and Boulderclaw; aunt is Snowfern; cousins are Stonecoat, Shadefur, Ravenpaw, Jaypaw, Willowpaw, Blossompaw
Backstory:
From a very young age, Mossrain knew he wasn't fit for a warrior, and found himself excited with Goldenpool's life and usually followed her around while causing troubles with his brother, Pebblepeak. Surprisingly, Mossrain was very shy and quiet when he was young. When he was four moons old, he didn't want to bother Goldenpool and thought he knew enough about herbs, so he went in search of tansy but ended up with yarrow instead. Scared and angered at him, Goldenpool started teaching him simple herbs, then soon took him on as an apprentice. He stayed close to Pebblepeak during his apprenticeship and being a full medicine cat. During his apprenticeship, he found himself getting braver and soon couldn't stop talking.

Ratpaw(Rowanpaw)

Body Shape:
Broad shoulders, large chest, short legs, thick paws, webbed toes, sleek short fur, small ears, long thin tail
Coat And Eyes:
Solid brown fur, bright amber eyes, dark nose, short whiskers
Personality:
Pros: brave, confident, protective,
Cons: holds grudges, hotheaded,
Kin:
Mother is Aspenheart; father is unknown; brother is Blazepaw; sister is Lavenderkit
Backstory:
Rowanpaw was born as Ratkit but secretly changed his name for clear reasons and deeper reasons. After his mother abandoned him and his brother when they were very young, Rowanpaw has had a bad hatred for his mother with no remorse, all love gone. The only cats he truly, truly cares about are Blazepaw and Emberheart. Blazepaw, being his only family left, will forever be close to him; while Emberheart had been a good friend since he was a young kit after she helped him (no spoilers) and she is like a sister to him. He finds it hard to like someone, but once he makes a connection he will do anything for them

Emberheart

Body Shape:
Large chest, broad shoulders, short legs, big thick paws, webbed toes, sleek short fur, small ears, large eyes
Coat And Eyes:
Light ginger fur, yellow eyes, short uneven whiskers
Personality:
Pros: optimistic, cheerful, loving
Cons: over-caring, sensitive
Kin:
Mother is Clovertail; father is unknown; sister is Hazelfur; brother is Birchsplash
Backstory:
Despite the small amount of prey in their territory, Emberheart had

a rather happy life and enjoyed spending time with her littermates and her mother. As a young warrior, Emberheart started taking care of Ratpaw and Blazepaw instead of her brother, who wanted to focus on being a warrior. Blazepaw was independent from the start, and so was Ratpaw, but he was depressed and lonely and took shelter to Emberheart and they soon became like siblings. Sometimes, Emberheart feels like more of a mother to him, but she knows that he doesn't want that, and being a littermate is as close as kin as she can get.

Chapter Ten

Ravenpaw opened his eyes to find himself in a familiar woodland, though he couldn't see Echo anywhere around him. He could see the Twoleg fence in the distance, and a large oak tree with a strong she-cat scent underneath. Scrambling to his paws, he stretched out his muscles then padded forward, peeking through the roots that were showing above the ground, giving light to a den hidden inside.

The den was small and would probably only fit three or four cats, and currently, Sage was stretched out on the ground, her belly bulging up as she slept soundly. "Echo?" Ravenpaw called, looking around and sniffing the air, but the StarClan resident wasn't to be seen, heard, or scented.

But, as he was sniffing the air, he caught another scent. Even though he hadn't seen the tom for a few sunrises, he recognized Bat's scent, though there were three other cats with him he didn't know. Soon the group appeared, showing Bat with his powerful frame with a she-cat and two young toms. The she-cat was a pretty silver-gray tabby, while the two toms were both gray.

"Sage?" Bat called as he padded up, and Ravenpaw stretched his claws hesitantly on the ground before deciding to slip forward into the den. He went into the corner and watched with curious eyes, Echo fading from his mind.

"Hmm?" The old kittypet raised her head, blinking her yellow eyes to clear them from sleep. "Bat? Are you back?"

"Yes, my love," Bat answered, sliding into the den, followed by the silver-gray tabby she-cat. "This is Creek, the cat I told you about," he introduced.

"Hello, Sage, I've heard a lot about you," Creek meowed, stepping forward.

"Who's outside?" Sage ignored the greeting, her ears flicking scaredly.

Creek purred, seeming to not care about the rudeness.

"Those are my sons, Smoke and Flint. Bat hunted for me when I was raising them, and I had owed him ever since. When he told me about you, I knew I wanted to help you until you were ready. I was very scared my first time, too," Creek's mew was soft and her blue eyes glowed kindly.

"Thank you," Sage murmured, sounding embarrassed. "I really don't want to be rude, but is there possibly any prey?" Sage looked like she regretted the question immediately.

Creek chuckled with a light purr in her throat. "Don't worry, I'm sure you've noticed you've been eating a lot more. And yes, Flint caught a sparrow on our way here." The she-cat turned to look at the den entrance.

Flint, the bigger of the two littermates with dark gray fur and deep green eyes, stepped in and dropped the prey-Ravenpaw was surprised he hadn't noticed it-then quickly left, wanting to give space to the two she-cats, and Bat seemed to agree and silently slipped out after him. "Smoke will stay to help you two with anything, and we'll go hunting," Bat meowed, then looked at the two toms, searching for agreements or arguments. But both the toms nodded and followed his orders.

"How old are they?" Sage asked as she pulled the sparrow close and began plucking away the feathers, her belly growling from the warm blood that dripped from teeth marks.

"Smoke and Flint? Eleven moons. They were born in the middle of newleaf. A strong season to be born." Creek's eyes glowed, and she moved forward, settling onto her haunches. "Do you mind if I feel? I'll hopefully be able to tell if the kits are coming soon."

"Of course," Sage answered, sliding back down from the uncomfortable crouch she had to spread out, her sparrow not yet finished, though she had taken a few bites while she put the feathers in a pile next to her stomach. "There's four of them," she added.

"Four? Well, good luck. I could barely handle two!" The loner let out a small mrrow *as she moved one of her large white paws forward, and*

she felt gently around on the she-cat's side. Ravenpaw remembered how Mossrain had taught him the same thing. How had that stayed throughout so many moons, but yet this story was hidden in a bush full of thorns?

"I'm happy I'll have you to help me," Sage replied in a playful tone, and Creek purred again, taking her paw away.

"They feel healthy, and by the movement and placing of them, I think they'll be coming soon. Maybe even tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Fear clouded Sage's eyes, but, then, after a moment, it cleared. It was replaced with joy and excitement and worry and love, all swirling around together.

Creek started to answer, but it faded into a jumble of words and everything faded, then Ravenpaw found himself in StarClan's forest, with Echo standing in front of him. "Why weren't you with me?" His first question. He wanted to know why she had given him the dream alone.

"So you wouldn't be distracted," Echo responded in the soft tone that matched her mother's. "Do you have any questions about what you saw?"

"Why can't I see more?" He ignored the nature of the question. "I want to know more about the history of the Clans!" His claws scratched the ground and he felt impatient for more answers as to why the stories changed.

"All will come in time." Echo looked softly at the apprentice. "You need to focus on your training, and this will come slowly. It's not easy for me to access the past, you know. It takes all my energy to manage to show you just that much. I can't rush you into it because my energy will be spent, and your mind won't be able to take any more information."

He looked down at his paws, scratching the earth. "Okay," he murmured. Then he raised his head again. "I'm sorry. What happens when your energy is spent?"

"I won't be able to visit you, and I won't be able to help anyone. If I use too much energy, I won't be able to interact with the past or the Clans at

all," Echo meowed.

"Does it really matter if you're out of power for a few days?" Ravenpaw asked, curious.

"It matters a lot, surprisingly," Echo answered. "Well, there are many, but one of the important ones is that if Acornstar dies, I need all my energy, my power, to revive her. And the most important is--know the mist we traveled through?--" Echo paused to let Ravenpaw nod, "well, that's how to use all our power. To get out of StarClan we need the mist to travel to the ground world, the past, anywhere. Without the mist, we wouldn't be able to do any interactions with the Clans."

"What if something happened to it? To the mist portal?"

Echo blinked. "I don't know," she answered. "Let's pray we never find out."

"Come on Ravenpaw, up up up!" Mossrain's voice broke the slow fading to a stop. Ravenpaw tiredly blinked open his eyes, seeing the fuzzy medicine cat den. "How would you cure a kittencough without any catmint?"

"Uh..." Ravenpaw shook his head to clear his mind, though it was still fuzzy from the dream. Would Sage's kitting go okay? How long would Creek and her sons stay? Forcing them from his mind, and tried to remember the herbs. "Tansy, right? In small doses?"

"What in small doses?" Mossrain leaned his head forward and tilted it to the side.

"Tansy."

"And how is it delivered?" Mossrain meowed.

"In small doses," he replied, then realized what Mossrain meant and added, "the kit would eat it."

"I have trained you well," Mossrain meowed dramatically, dipping his head down and stretching out a paw. "The easiest way to explain curing kittencough would be, 'feed the kit small doses of tansy with water and honey if it doesn't get better.' I'm proud,

though, you did very well. Whenever Goldenpool woke me and asked questions like that I would always mess up!"

Ravenpaw gave a small mew of amusement and pushed himself up, stretching his jaws open and yawning. "Thanks, Mossrain." He thought about mentioning Echo's visit to his mentor but pushed it away. He thought about this often, for he hadn't told Mossrain or any cat that the Clan's creator was visiting him. It felt too... strange. "What are we doing today?"

"Well, the half-moon is tonight, so we'll make sure the Clan is nice and healthy then we'll head off. We'll meet with BatClan's medicine cat at the border then we'll head to the Star Cave, and Hawkstream and Poppysong will meet us there."

"Is Hawkstream CrowClan's medicine cat?" Ravenpaw asked.

"Yup! She's pretty nice, but she can have a temper if you mess with her! I learned that the hard way as an apprentice. The first time I met her I kept asking questions and she finally snapped at me and chased me all the way back to our border!" Mossrain let out a laugh, raising a gray paw. "She has a good personality, though, and I think she'll like you."

"Does Goldenpool need anything?" he cut in when Mossrain paused to take a breath.

"Oh, I don't think so, but you can go and check if you-" Mossrain stopped his sentence short as Ravenpaw raced away, slipping out the den entrance, planning to run straight for the nursery, but he was blinded by bright white sunlight. Once he could see better, he hurried to the nursery and slipped in.

Immediately, his eyes narrowed on Goldenpool watching her three kits crawl around the den's floor. Their eyes had started to open but their bellies still lay on the ground, their little legs unable to carry them. "Nice to see you, Ravenpaw," Goldenpool purred. "Have you seen Oakcloud around?"

Ravenpaw tried thinking of who had seen in the clearing, but he didn't really remember scents. "No, I don't think so."

"Oh..." Goldenpool looked at her kits and reached forward to nudge Heatherkit closer to her littermates, then said hesitantly, "would you mind watching them for a moment while I go find him?"

"Of course!" he responded the heartbeat she finished, and she purred, standing and padding over. She touched her nose to his cheek, then watched her kits for a moment, then she quickly disappeared before she could change her mind. He purred lightly, then padded over and sat next to the kits.

They were crawling around in circles, mewling with their eyes cracked open, and Ravenpaw looked closely at Stormkit. Her solid brown coat was fuzzy and soft with kit fluff, and her eyes were a pale blue, like all kits' eyes were. He looked back to only a quarter moon ago when she was born when *he* had saved her. *He* had done something special.

"Hey, Stormkit," he murmured, moving one of his paws over to Dustkit to pull him a little closer. He mewled a quiet complaint but started going in the direction Ravenpaw had pushed him, towards Heatherkit. "I'm excited for you to grow into a warrior," he added, leaning down so he was in front of the tiny she-kit.

She paused from her pitiful crawl and weakly raised her head, sniffing around and twitching her short whiskers and wiggling her nose. He purred softly at the kit, and she sneezed from the draft of air coming from his nose. Ravenpaw got a curious feeling in his chest, and he moved forward and touched her nose.

Stormkit was bouncing around the camp, her tail in the air, her golden eyes shining. She was watching a butterfly fluttering around in the air, and she continued to paw playfully at it. Light snow littered the clearing, and a few snowflakes floated down. She was distracted by these and started pawing at them, mewling happily.

"Stormkit! Come back to the nursery!" Goldenpool was at the entrance to the den, and Stormkit hurried back and came up to her mother. Goldenpool looked tired, and there was something on her side. It was a bump, her fur curling tightly around it.

"How's your bumpy-thing?" Stormkit mewled, reaching up and pawing at

the bump, and it surprisingly didn't seem to bother the she-cat.

"It's good, darling, it's good," Goldenpool replied, though her mew was strained and her ribs seemed to be showing more than they should, even with leaf-bare. She was a queen, so she always ate first. And Stormkit was fine and plump, so it seemed odd.

Stormkit started past her mother, but then Goldenpool groaned, choked on her breath, and crumbled to the ground.

Ravenpaw blinked open his eyes.

Stormkit was right in front of him, while Heatherkit and Dustkit were in the same place as before he had closed his eyes. Licking his lips scaredly, Ravenpaw focused part of his brain on the kits and the other on the vision.

Did he just see Goldenpool die? No. No, it didn't seem like she had died, but like this was something that had happened before. It had sent fear through Stormkit, but not as much as it would've if her mother had collapsed for the first time.

"How were they?"

He jumped, having not heard Goldenpool approaching. Instantly, he tried to look at her side, but he was facing the wrong way. The queen went over to her nest and sat down, looking over at her kits, who instantly started towards her with mewls for food. "Uh, fine." Ravenpaw stood up and picked Stormkit up gently and put her in the nest, then he did the same with Heatherkit and Dustkit.

"Thanks," Goldenpool said, turning in her nest before laying down heavily and turning onto her side so her kits could feed. This opened up the side that had been disrupted by the bump, but now it was clear.

Swallowing, Ravenpaw scooted forward and brought up a paw. Goldenpool watched him, curious, and allowed him to lay his paw down on her side just lower than her front legs. He couldn't feel anything, but the bump was still fresh in his mind.

"Ravenpaw, what's wrong?" Goldenpool meowed, and he looked at

her, eyes scared. "Ravenpaw, what did you see?"

"Uh, nothing," he mewed quickly. He couldn't let Goldenpool know this, not completely. "I just saw Stormkit when she was a little older and you had uh, something on your side. But, it's not here, so, I'm gonna go."

Before the she-cat could say anything, he bounded across the clearing and went into the medicine cat's den, swallowing heavily. He would tell Mossrain, he would tell him everything. Then he could decide what happened. "Ravenpaw, everything okay?" Mossrain called from the small pool of water in the corner.

Instantly, Ravenpaw went forward and described what had happened, even the feelings Stormkit had felt. Fear, but not horror. Mossrain surprisingly stayed quiet the entire time, though his paws worked anxiously on the ground.

"That's all I saw. I couldn't tell Goldenpool, I didn't know how to tell her," he finished, his throat dry. Before speaking, Mossrain grabbed a moss ball and dipped it in the water, then he dropped it in front of his apprentices. "Thanks," he mewed, moving forward and licking softly at it.

"I've never seen or heard of something like this," Mossrain murmured, most likely to himself. "We'll keep this from Goldenpool so she can focus on her kits. We'll keep a close eye on her, though, and hopefully, we can stop this before it gets too bad."

Ravenpaw nodded agreement but was unable to put it into words. Mossrain came over and sat next to him, putting his chin on Ravenpaw's forehead, and the apprentice tucked closer to him, his tail tip flicking. He took comfort in his mentor's warmth, and his breathing-which had been a little strained since the vision-loosened and let his chest free. He let out a big breath and forced himself to stand up, stepping away from Mossrain.

"Thanks," he murmured, head down, and Mossrain flicked his tail on Ravenpaw's flanks.

"Of course, Ravenpaw. I know its scary sometimes, being a medicine

cat. The health of the whole Clan is on your shoulders, but remember, Goldenpool is a medicine cat, too. If something starts happening to her, she'll tell us. One time she got whitecough and didn't tell me, so she kept seeing patients and when she was fixing Grayblaze's sprained leg she got him sick. She doesn't hide anything anymore, especially if it could hurt her kits."

"Okay." Ravenpaw nodded. "I'm gonna go and see my littermates. Hopefully, they'll get my mind off of Goldenpool."

"Go ahead, we can work on some herbs before we leave tonight," Mossrain replied.

"Oh, right..." He had already forgotten that they would be visiting StarClan.

"Don't worry, we have plenty of time. We need to get there when the moon is high in the sky, so we'll probably leave when the moon is rising. Make sure to eat something when you're visiting your littermates, you'll need your strength." Mossrain looked at him with soft hazel eyes. "Remember that StarClan has already accepted you as a medicine cat," he added.

"I will," Ravenpaw mewed, looking at his mentor for a moment, then he forced himself to leave quickly. He looked around the bright clearing, and his eyes instantly locked on Blossompaw laying on the Rock Pile, her tail flicking calmly as she enjoyed peace and quiet. After a spur of bravery, he mewed, "hey, Blossompaw!" and hurried towards her. Maybe he could get her to speak to him again. She hadn't even said hello in a quarter moon and it broke his heart.

He remembered back to when they would tussle softly together as kits, how she would sit out from playful hunting or fighting to spend time with him. Why had it changed so much over just a few short moons? Did she regret sitting and talking with him instead of play-training with Willowpaw and Jaypaw?

The apprentice raised her head as he jumped up, and she sighed, getting to her paws. "Thanks for ruining my rest," she growled with thick sarcasm, padding heavily to the side of the rock, and she jumped down with a snort and another sigh.

"Blossompaw, wait!" He jumped down after his sister and hurried to her side. "Can we please talk?"

She turned her head to face him, eyes hard. "I don't have anything to say to you, *medicine cat*. I'm trying to become a warrior, and I don't need to be held back by anything or anyone." Her tail lashed and she flattened her ears. "So leave me alone and practice around with your leaves." she snorted sarcastically and padded off on quick paws.

He stared after her, staying where he was in the hope he wouldn't anger her more. He waited until she was busy speaking with Maskdapple, then he went to the fresh-kill pile and grabbed a plump vole before racing to the apprentices' den, hoping not to be seen. He slipped down into the den then into the open apprentice area.

Featherpaw and Firepaw were there, pawing at each other's faces near the soil wall, while Brightpaw and Jaypaw were chatting over a mouse and sparrow. Happy to see his brother, Ravenpaw started over.

"Foxpounce said we would travel into the tunnels today! I'm so excited that he's *finally* letting me come with him," Jaypaw was meowing. "Ravenpaw! You're here!" He flicked his tail in greeting, then looked back at Brightpaw, who nodded to the new member before speaking.

"We barely even use them, you know. They're used in emergencies, like fires or invasions," Brightpaw meowed as she reached down and tore a piece of flesh from her prey. Ravenpaw followed suit, but Jaypaw was too busy responding.

"I know that, but it's my first time getting to go in!" He licked his jaws then started into his prey, and Ravenpaw's mind wandered.

He remembered when he was a young kit and Jaypaw and Blossompaw had dragged him and Willowpaw to the tunnel entrance behind the nursery, wanting to go exploring, but that's when they found out about the barrier. The warriors were smarter than they had thought. There were brambles protecting the

entrance, and if they needed to be moved the warriors' had a large stick stuck under the barrier with a rock under it, allowing them to press on one side and open the passageway.

They can hitch it so it stays open, then when on the other side they can knock it back down again. There's also a stick on the inside of the tunnel, so they can lift it from there, too. "I wonder who thought of it, the barrier," he meowed quietly, wondering if Echo's visits would show him how it had started.

"I can almost lift it up!" Brightpaw boasted, straightening up her head. "I can get it really close, but I can't get it to hitch yet; I can't pull it down that far."

"Just wait, I'll be able to do it before you!" Jaypaw mewed with his mouth still full of prey, and it sputtered out and a few drops of blood scattered on Brightpaw's black and white muzzle.

"Hey!" she called, throwing her paw over her muzzle in an attempt to clean it. Jaypaw made a mistake and let out a *mrrow* of amusement, and Brightpaw narrowed her eyes at him. "You're going down!"

She launched herself from her crouch and barreled the young apprentice over. Jaypaw didn't even have a chance and he was pinned to the ground, eyes wide and ears flat. "Hey, no fair! I just started training!" he mewled.

Brightpaw smirked, eyes shining, and neatly jumped off, licking a paw then running it over her face. "Then don't challenge me," she meowed. Then, in a flash of dark fiery-red fur, Brightpaw was gone and on her back with Featherpaw on top of her. Growling in delight, the two she-cats began tussling around, stirring up dust and making Ravenpaw sneeze.

Finishing the last bits of his prey, Ravenpaw turned and snuck out from the den, enjoying the sun when it shined down on his pelt. The leaf-fall winds were cool and the sun wasn't too warm, but it still felt fresh and the high air of their camp made it easy to breathe. He stood there, eyes closed, muzzle stretched up, and he let the wind ruffle his thin sleek fur.

His ears listened to the camp clearing. He could hear Russetdawn and Flamepaw talking near the fresh-kill pile about battle moves, while not far off in a senior warrior eating area Boulderclaw and Grayblaze were sharing quiet words. He could hear pawsteps hurrying up on the pathway to the camp, and he could smell... fear?

He opened his eyes to see others in the clearing had heard the patrol as well. They appeared after a moment, revealing the dawn patrol, consisting of Stonecoat, Shadefur, Thorntail, Pebblepeak, and Willowpaw. All their eyes were wide, and it only took a heartbeat before Acornstar and Eagleclaw, her deputy, to be padding over.

"What happened?" Acornstar asked, and Ravenpaw looked over the patrol.

Stonecoat and Shadefur were close together, pelts ruffled; Thorntail looked as snooty as always with a high, proud head, though the fear in his eyes gave away his true feelings; Pebblepeak stood nearby with his spine fur bristling; and lastly was Willowpaw, eyes wide with horror, pelt fluffed completely, her tail tucked in between her legs, and her ears drooped back.

"What happened?" Acornstar asked again when the patrol didn't answer, and Stonecoat, Shadefur, and Pebblepeak all looked at each other before Shadefur forced himself to step forward.

Shadefur looked around the gathered group of cats, which slowly grew as more warriors and apprenticed came; he opened his jaws and said loudly in a fearful meow, "there's a dead Twoleg in the forest!"

How did you like it? I hope you enjoyed this one and the Warriors: In Depth. I did the In-Depth because I wanted you all to know the main characters a little better and so I could remember their details xD I hope you liked this chapter and the fact it was up on time, and I'm excited for the next few because I'm *finally* getting the plot moving a little faster. I plan to make this book about twenty, maybe twenty-five chapters, so this is about the middle. And I do plan on making a second book!

Question #1: Why do you think Blossompaw is acting up?

Question #2: What do you think is going to happen with the Twoleg?

Chapter Eleven

A dead Twoleg? Jaypaw stared in shock at his sister. *Did she really see a dead Twoleg?* His fur bushed with excitement. What had happened? He saw the look of terror in her eyes, and it made him want to see it even more. He knew Twolegs often traveled in small groups into their territory and set up small dens and stayed for a few nights during warm days, but they had *never* ended up dead.

"How is that possible?" Frostfall called, while Snowfern padded up silently and pressed herself against Willowpaw, whispering in her ear. The small she-cat nodded, and they headed towards the medicine cat's den. Acornstar nodded to them as they passed, then turned her attention to the crowd.

"Oakcloud, Boulderclaw, Russetdawn, Foxpouce, Eagleclaw, and I will go check it out," Acornstar called then looked back at the dawn patrol, nodding to Shadefur. "Show us where it is."

"Yes, Acornstar." The tom dipped his head and began to turn, but paused as Jaypaw ran up to his mentor.

"Can I please come? Please please please?" He begged, his eyes wide and ears flattened.

"No, Jaypaw, you stay here with your sister," Foxpounce answered immediately.

"Please! I promise I'll behave myself!" he pleaded again, not caring how desperate he looked in front of his Clan. He wanted to go and see it for himself!

Foxpounce looked over at Acornstar, and Jaypaw felt a ray of hope, but then his leader shook her head. "No, Jaypaw, Foxpounce was right. No apprentice will come with us." She turned her head to the gathered Clan. "Stonecoat will tell you all where the Twoleg is, and *no* apprentices shall be allowed in that area. No matter the reason. And unless I give permission, only senior warriors are allowed to go

see it."

She didn't wait for her Clan to agree, and, after nodding to Shadefur, the patrol quickly disappeared from the camp, their paws drumming down the pathway. Jaypaw mewled in sadness, his tail drooping, and Pebblepeak padded up.

"Trust me, Jaypaw, you don't want to see it," he murmured. "It was awful."

"Okay," he murmured, but his heart still ached with the feeling of the adventure he missed.

"Why don't you go check on your sister? I'm sure she'll want to see you," the young gray tabby meowed, flicking the apprentice's flank with his tail.

"Okay," he said again. He turned with a lashing tail and stalked for the medicine cat's den, his paws stomping heavily on the grass. He was frustrated that Foxpounce had made him stay home. It was so unfair! He deserved to learn everything he can. He slipped silently into the medicine den with anger still making his pelt bristle, though it softened when he saw his sister.

She was crouched in a moss and feather nest near the small pool of water, and Ravenpaw was right beside her, licking her bushed fur with a soft, slow tongue. Jaypaw could see the horror in his excitable, bouncy sister's eyes, and for a moment he didn't want to see the dead Twoleg, then that thought disappeared and he longed to see it even more.

"Hey, Willowpaw," Jaypaw meowed softly, but the she-cat didn't look from her paws, icy-blue eyes wide with terror. Ravenpaw noticed him, though, and gave him a small nod before looking back at his sister.

"Come on Willowpaw, eat these," Ravenpaw murmured, pushing a leaf towards her face, and Jaypaw saw a few dark seeds on it.

"What are those?" He couldn't help but ask, moving forward and sitting on Willowpaw's open side. He crouched down and licked her

ear, which she flicked in response, but she didn't make any other move.

"Poppy seeds," Ravenpaw explained. "They'll help Willowpaw calm down, and let her rest. Please?" He added to his sister, and, finally, she leaned down and stuck out her small rough pink tongue, licking up the seeds, then she fell still again. "Thank you." Ravenpaw licked her cheek then stood up. "I'll get you some water."

He padded away to a small pile of moss, and Jaypaw snuggled closer to his sister. "What did it look like?" He flinched as he said it, instantly feeling awful about using his sister's painful memories to gain what he wanted.

Surprisingly, she answered, though in a quite hoarse mew. "It was terrible," she murmured, "there was blood everywhere... it smelled so bad, worse than crow-food or the dirt-place." She slowly turned her head to face him. "Its eyes were open. They were dark and filled with fear and terror and horror," her mew started to become a sob. "There was blood coming from its mouth, too," she added.

He didn't answer her but instead curled closer, resting his head on her shoulders. He could feel her relaxing under him, and she yawned softly. She tried to mew something, but it was drowsy and deep, then a heartbeat later she had slowed her breathing, sunk into the moss, and was fast asleep.

He heard pawsteps and turned his head to see Ravenpaw standing there, eyes sad with the moss ball at his paws. "I can't even imagine seeing that," the black apprentice murmured, blinking, then he shook his head. "I'm gonna go check on Goldenpool. Would you mind staying with her? I don't want her alone."

"Yeah," Jaypaw nodded immediately without thinking. Ravenpaw blinked, grateful, then he turned and left, leaving his brother to his thoughts. He tried to think of what the Twoleg looked like, but his mind demanded to see the real thing. He *had* to see it, no matter what Foxpounce said.

"Jaypaw?"

He looked over at the den entrance to see Blossompaw standing there, still flicking and eyes unreadable.

"Will you come out here? This place smells awful," she meowed, curling her nose, then she disappeared. Jaypaw looked over at Willowpaw, remembering Ravenpaw's words, but after seeing his sister sleeping so soundly, he knew a few moments wouldn't hurt.

Standing up, he quietly padded out of the nest then headed out of the den, immediately being hit by sunlight and the face of his sister. "What's wrong?" He meowed.

Blossompaw snorted, throwing her head. "Oh, like you don't want to see that Twoleg as much as I do!" she growled. "Petalpaw, Flamepaw, and I are going to see it at moonhigh. Come and meet us at the forest-side camp entrance, if you're brave enough." She turned around and flicked his face with her tail, then she bounded across the clearing.

Jaypaw stared after her, excitement tingling through his muscles. Yes! He could go and see it! He wasn't going to turn the opportunity down for anything-he was going to see this dead Twoleg; especially if two older apprentices were going. Paws itching to leave, Jaypaw swallowed his excitement and forced himself back into the medicine cat's den, settling down by Willowpaw's sleeping form.

Jaypaw had thought he only nodded off for a moment by Willowpaw's side, but when he looked around he suddenly noticed the cool, whispering air and darkness from outside the den. He slowly stood up and stretched out his muscles, then he quietly padded over the cold ground, eying the empty nests of Mossrain and Ravenpaw. They had left earlier for the Moonpool.

He sniffed the air gently, his head filling with all sorts of mingling herb smells, and he had no idea how they could live with the scents constantly. He recalled Blossompaw saying the same thing and felt happy he was relating to his sister. He knew Blossompaw was having troubles with Ravenpaw, which was strange because they used to be so close, but he had decided a few moons ago to keep away from trying to get them to talk.

"Finally!" He saw Blossompaw across the deserted clearing, standing there with Petalpaw and Flamepaw beside her. "I thought you were being a mouse-hearted kit! We almost left without you." She kept her tone low, though it was easy to hear the impatientness coming from the words.

Jaypaw stayed quiet and followed the two older apprentices with his sister by his side, sneaking towards the forest entrance on quiet paws, ears flicking towards the warriors' den. It was silent, and Jaypaw was surprised no one had heard them speaking. It was that moment when he remembered there would be a camp guard, but then they stepped into the open from behind a fern bush.

"Well, what do we have here?" It was Thorntail, the newest warrior. He had been made a warrior only a few sunrises before Jaypaw and his littermates had become apprentices. He was always a grumpy tom.

Surprisingly, Petalpaw, Flamepaw, and Blossompaw didn't seem disturbed by the young warrior's appearance. "Thorntail, good, you got on guard. Are you ready to go?" Blossompaw meowed, and the brown tabby shook out his fur.

"Of course I am. I saw you all forever ago when you were waiting for him." He jerked his head in the direction of Jaypaw, who flattened his ears but decided to say nothing. He was still a brand new apprentice; Blossompaw was too, of course, but she had fit into the group easily with her strong personality.

"Can we go already?" Flamepaw grumbled, running his claws over the ground.

"Finally!" Blossompaw muttered, rolling her head, and she started forward. Petalpaw and Thorntail instantly forced themselves into the front, being the oldest, while Flamepaw fell in step with Blossompaw and Jaypaw.

"Thorntail, are you sure you can leave guard? What if something happens?" Jaypaw meowed, and the young warrior scoffed.

"Oh, we're fine!" He lashed his tail without looking back.

"I don't know, Thorntail," Petalpaw mewed questionably as they headed down the rocky path to the forest. "We shouldn't leave the camp without a guard."

"Really?" The brown tabby looked at the younger tortoiseshell. "We're completely disobeying our leader, but yet you want to risk it by having me wake up a replacement?" The warrior hissed, ears flattening.

Petalpaw stared at the warrior with an icy gaze, and after a moment the tabby broke.

"Fine! You four start heading for the Twoleg, I'll follow your trail." He turned around and began to back up the pathway. Petalpaw looked like he was going to say something, but then shook his head and leaped from the pathway. The younger apprentices followed quickly, though Flamepaw took the lead and stuck his nose to the ground. He had always been the best at finding scents, and it didn't take long for him to flick his tail and started forward quickly.

Petalpaw padded by his side, and Jaypaw stayed back with his sister. They kept quiet to let Flamepaw focus, and Jaypaw looked around at the forest. He hadn't been here at night, yet, and he had to admit that it was absolutely beautiful, but also a little scary. The trees stretched far above, letting shadows stretch over the brush and undergrowth.

They were deep and mysterious, with the leaves on the trees rustling softly from the wind. He could hear the sound of small critters scrambling around on the forest floor. He was tempted to hunt but decided against it. He didn't want to leave any possible evidence that they had come. He looked back at the small path Flamepaw had led them onto, and he was glad he wasn't getting tripped by vines.

He wanted to talk to Blossompaw about how on his first time in the forest he had gotten tangled up in vines, but forced himself to stay quiet for Flamepaw's sake. They hadn't bee traveling for too much longer before there were rushing pawsteps behind them, and they paused and watched, a little anxious, for the cat to emerge.

It turned out to be Thorntail, slowing as he neared with a lashing tail. "I can't believe you made me do that. I had to tell Frostfall I was going hunting, and I'd be back to take guard again so we would have a way to get back into camp!" His eyes flashed angrily. "You owe me, Petalpaw!"

"I forgot we would need a way back in," Petalpaw admitted. "Sorry."

"Shush!" Flamepaw growled, sticking his nose into some leaves. "It's just up ahead," he meowed, then headed forward at a trot. Quickly, the other apprentices and warrior followed, and the strong smell of blood rushed through Jaypaw's nose, followed by the sour scent of death, which he recognized from when Berrywhisker had died.

Flamepaw led them off the path and through some undergrowth, and they emerged into a small clearing, and they all paused immediately.

It was awful.

The Twoleg was spread out over the ground, their pale skin covered with dark blood, and the horrible smell filled the air. More blood was scattered onto the ground and leaves, dried to the surfaces. Thorntail was the first to move forward, and Petalpaw and Flamepaw slowly followed, though they split up and padded around, looking curiously at everything.

"Awesome..."

Jaypaw looked over at his sister and was a little scared to see excitement glowing in her eyes. There was some disgust, too, which made him feel a little better, but he was still scared that she was joyed by the horrible sight. Shaking his head, he tottered away from her and closer to the Twoleg, walking around its side to see its face, all the while sniffing the air.

Beneath the smell of blood, he could tell the dead creature was a female, though he couldn't disclose anything else. He turned his face to meet the Twoleg's, and fear clamped over his heart. Its eyes were open, dark and glossy with fear and sadness. Its mouth was open, too, with blood leaking out the side.

What happened here? He thought, his fur bushing scaredly. What had killed the Twoleg? He had never seen one before, but the warriors spoke how most animals were scared of them and they were really strong. This one looked like it had been more than killed, like it had been in a battle, maybe.

"I wonder what happened?" Petalpaw murmured.

"I think it was killed," Flamepaw hissed quietly at the older apprentice, then he padded away from the blood and sat heavily. "I expected more than this!" His tail lashed.

"It's still pretty cool," Jaypaw murmured, upset he had broken the warrior code already in his apprenticeship but glad he had got to see it. Now he knew he wasn't missing out on something huge. It seemed quite small, now.

"I guess we should head back," Petalpaw meowed, and Blossompaw looked over from where she had been sniffing at the Twoleg's paws.

"What?" She meowed, ears flattening.

"There's nothing here, and we don't want to risk getting caught," he meowed.

"It feels a little duller than I imagined," Flamepaw admitted grumpily. "I thought I'd be more impressed." He shrugged carelessly and started for the path again. Jaypaw instantly followed, wanting to get home, his head dizzy with tiredness. He hadn't done anything today, except one hunting patrol early in the day, the rest he had been resting. He had rested too much today, and his muscles were soft and strained from the simple walk.

I just want to sleep, he said, despite having already overslept. He was so tired he just wanted to sleep more... The group set out from the Twoleg, with Jaypaw yawning their entire way back.

When they returned to camp, the apprentices waited at the bottom of the pathway while Thorntail bounced over the rocks with a vole clamped in his jaws. He had caught it to help his case of going out

hunting, and it wasn't long before he appeared. "Cost is clear!" he called quietly.

The apprentices quickly slunk through the clearing and disappeared into their den, slipping under the large boulder with stealth. They slipped over to their nests, with Jaypaw's empty without Willowpaw, and he guessed she was still in the medicine cat's den. *Of course she's in the medicine cat's den! She was dead asleep the last time you saw her!* He mentally cursed himself and looked through the dark den, his eyes used to the shadows already because of the night sky outside.

Flamepaw curled up between Firepaw and Featherpaw, and his sister shifted and curled closer to his cold frame automatically, her instinct wanting to make him warm. Petalpaw circled his nest then curled up behind Brightpaw, giving her ear a soft lick before resting his muzzle on the back of her neck.

He was jealous for a moment, but then Blossompaw stepped in, curling up next to him, and he tucked close to her, hoping she'd warm him up, but her fur was cold and she shivered slightly. "It's way too cold out there at night," she admitted quietly, her mew sounding quiet and soft and very unlike her. It made Jaypaw feel happy to hear it.

"I agree," he murmured, then yawned, curling his tail over his sister's back, tucking his muzzle under his paws, and Blossompaw hid her face in his shoulder fluff. Being close to his sister let him slip into sleep quickly, his dreams quiet and wistful.

But it seemed like moments before it was interrupted by a sharp paw jabbing his side. Warily, he looked up with blurry eyes to see the fuzzy face of Foxpounce. His eyes were hard and he growled in a deep, raspy voice, "Up. Now." Then he disappeared deeper into the den and jabbed at Flamepaw then Petalpaw.

"What does he want?" Blossompaw muttered, having been woken up just before her brother. He shrugged tiredly and yawned, then he forced himself to his paws and shook out his muscles. They were cramped with all his resting and they burned from the adventure last night.

Foxpounce stalked from the den with a lashing tail, and the four tired apprentices struggled to follow him out. As Jaypaw emerged, Petalpaw came close and growled in his ear. "Thorntail must've sold us out, the fox-heart!"

"You think they know?" Jaypaw hissed back, staying quiet with his head down.

"Of course! Why else would we be dragged to the leader's den at sunrise?"

Jaypaw looked at the sky and saw it was streaked with different colors of orange and light red, with only a small amount of blue. It was likely the dawn patrol hadn't even left, though it was close. He also noticed they were being led to the leader's den, as Petalpaw had said. Jaypaw caught a glance inside, and he saw a group of warriors hidden partly by the shadows, though it was clearer as they got closer.

Eagleclaw, her eyes unreadable and fur low; Maskdapple, standing near the waterfall inside the den with hard eyes, not minding the mist that scattered waterdrops on her whiskers; Silverstrike, his back fur bristling and his claws digging into the ground; Acornstar, sitting with her tail flicking over her paws, eyes in unreadable slits; and finally Thorntail, sitting hunched over against the cave wall with his head low, though light anger shined in his eyes.

Jaypaw followed his mentor over the slippery rocks and leaped into his leader's den, shaking out his fur, and he looked at the warriors around him. Their eyes were glued to all the apprentices' pelts, and Jaypaw found himself pressing his side against his sister's.

"Sit," Acornstar's mew was harsh and crackled through the den. All the apprentices sat together, flanks almost touching, and stayed quiet. Eagleclaw flicked her ears, and Thorntail slipped to Petalpaw's side.

The warriors sat in front of them with Acornstar slightly closer, her amber-brown eyes flaming with anger. "Well?" she snapped. "Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

Petalpaw spoke. But he didn't answer her; he turned to Thorntail and hissed, "Why did you sell us out?"

"What?" Thorntail's head reared back in shock. "I didn't sell *anybody* out, you fox-brained kit!" The young tabby lashed his tail. Petalpaw's tortoiseshell bushed lightly, though a sharp growl from Acornstar silenced them.

"Stop with this pointless arguing! If you were all true EchoClan cats, you would've realized you left your scent behind in the clearing!"

The apprentices and young warrior all held their breath for a few heartbeats. *How could we forget?* He understood that he didn't remember; after all, he was barely an apprentice, but Thorntail and Petalpaw were older. They should've known! *Oh, we're never going to become warriors!* he cried silently.

"I can't believe you all," Acornstar hissed, shaking her head. "I told you to stay away, but you did the complete opposite!" Her gaze whipped to Jaypaw. "And Jaypaw! Foxpounce and I said-right to your face!-that you weren't allowed to go near it! But what did you do?" Her eyes narrowed.

"I-" he began, even though he didn't know what he was going to say, but she cut him off.

"Maybe, *maybe*, you could all pass it off as a nighttime hunting trip and 'accidentally' stumbled upon it." Her tail flicked, mew heavy with sarcasm. "But you didn't even try to hide your scent! It was everywhere! You didn't even try!" Her tone turned into a deep growl. "I cannot believe the future warriors of my Clan can defy their leader like this!" She stood and began pacing back and forth.

"Acornstar told you only warriors she picked could go. But you apprentices think yourselves higher than your leader?" Eagleclaw stepped forward, and Petalpaw slunk to the ground as his mentor's eyes narrowed at him. She cast her gaze to Jaypaw and Blossompaw. "I can understand that you're still kits, but you were still told directly not to. Why would you think that's okay?"

"I thought I raised my kit to be an honorable cat," Foxpounce,

Flamepaw's father, added, not letting the two youngest apprentices try to explain themselves. He stared at both his son and Jaypaw. The young gray and white apprenticed looked at his flat paws, his whiskers twitching scaredly.

"I knew you'd be hard to train," Maskdapple began, staring down at Blossompaw, who flattened her ears defiantly at her mentor's hard tone, "but for you to do this..." She shook her head and snorted. "I expected more from Boulderclaw's kit."

That seemed to get to Blossompaw. Her eyes went wide and her ears drooped, her mouth opening slightly. Her whiskers twitched limp, and her eyes cried with pain. She tried to say something but it came out as a croak. None of the warriors seemed to care, though, and now it was Acornstar's to scorn them some more.

"Thorntail." She looked at the young warrior. "Look at me." She added when he continued to glance at his paws, and he finally forced his eyes up. "You've been a warrior for only a quarter moon, but yet you've already shown you don't deserve your title." He looked at her in shock.

"You're not taking away my warrior name, are you?" his mew was edged in fear.

"No, I won't do that," Acornstar shook her head lightly, and her lips curled. "But if *anything* like this happens again, you will go back to being an apprentice." Her eyes were hard. "I wonder what my sister would feel about this," she murmured, almost to herself, and Thorntail seemed like he had been struck by claws.

It took Jaypaw a moment to remember Acornstar's sister, Appleleaf, had been Thorntail's mother, though she was killed by a wandering rogue when she was alone in the forest. He knew Thorntail had once been a happy cat, but he became quiet and sad after his mother died, and it became worse when his father, Oakcloud, took Goldenpool as a mate. He hadn't even talked to the medicine cat since then, refusing to be seen by anyone except Mossrain, who he also didn't like but could just stand.

I would hate to lose a parent, Jaypaw thought, picturing his mother's

beautiful icy green-blue eyes, and his heart ached with the fear of what she'd say.

Suddenly, Acornstar turned to the apprentices. "How do you think your parents will feel? How do you think they'll feel that the cats that are caring on their blood through the Clan disobeyed their leader? The cat that will lead them for moons to come?" The she-cat's tail lashed. "Well?"

None of the apprentices spoke, so Foxpounce broke the silence. "I can tell you now, Acornstar. I don't think they'll be pleased; I know I'm not." His eyes hardened on his son. Maskdapple nodded in agreement, eying Petalpaw with hard eyes, and her son crouched lower to the ground.

"I'm sorry!" Flamepaw cried, his eyes scared, but Acornstar silenced him.

"Enough! I'm done with all of you. Your mentors and parents can decide punishments for you, but I'll tell you right now." She stood up and walked closer, causing the apprentices to lower themselves closer to the ground. "If you tell me who's idea it was, the rest of you will get a lighter punishment. Or, you can all stay without training while you focus on the more important things; learning honor and truth."

"But, I need to train to become a warrior!" Petalpaw mewed. It was a little more than a moon before he became a warrior, and he was probably desperate to train.

"Well, you should've thought of that before." Maskdapple looked at Petalpaw with hard eyes. "I'll be surprised if you ever become a warrior with how you act! I would expect this behavior from a cat still in the nursery." Her eyes flickered to Blossompaw and Jaypaw for a moment, suggesting she felt different about their involvement.

Before Petalpaw could answer his mother, Acornstar whipped around and lashed her tail. "I want all of you gone, now!" She stalked back to her nest.

"Out, now." Foxpounce began herding the young cats out, and they

slipped on the rocks in their hurry and Jaypaw ended up with a soaking hind leg as he landed on the grass, and he shook it out the best he could before his mentor approached. The apprentices stayed together, and their mentors stood in front of them.

"Petalpaw, you will be responsible for cleaning out the apprentices' den for half a moon. You will clean out the *entire* thing, not just a few nests." Eagleclaw looked at Thorntail. "You can work on your manners and clean the elders' den for the same amount of time."

"Flamepaw," Silverstrike hissed. So far, the silver tabby had completely ignored Petalpaw, and his son seemed heartbroken. Even though he was only getting anger from his mother, it was probably better than being ignored. "You can take the nursery, and you'll get Goldenpool *anything* she needs."

Eagleclaw's eyes suddenly whispered with something, and she leaned close to Silverstrike and whispered something. His eyes glowed in understanding and he nodded, so the deputy drew back and announced, "Flamepaw, you will take the elders' den. Thorntail." She looked at the young warrior with hard eyes. "You can take the nursery, and you'll be the one to help Goldenpool."

"I won't take care of that-" Thorntail cut himself off just in time. Curling his claws into the ground, he hissed an angry "fine" before turning his head away.

"Blossompaw," Maskdapple began. "You will help gather moss and feathers for your denmates."

"Jaypaw, you'll help her," Foxpounce added in, then looked over the entire group. "I'm so disappointed in all of you. All of you do your chores for half a moon, with no hunting or battle practice, and you will only leave camp to gather nesting material -but you will always be accompanied by a *trustworthy* warrior," Foxpounce added in with a glare at Thorntail.

"Yes, Foxpounce," Flamepaw was the first to murmur, but the rest soon followed.

"Sorry, Foxpounce."

"Maskdapple, I'm sorry." Petalpaw looked at his mother then towards his father, who just turned his head away. "Silverstrike, I'm sorry," he murmured.

"All of you go to your nests. A warrior will come soon to bring you for moss hunting." Eagleclaw flicked her tail then stalked away, followed by the other warriors, and Jaypaw, sighing sadly, turned around, only to find himself face to face with his father, Boulderclaw.

Well, that was a long chapter, and a really big rollercoaster! I hope you liked a see from Jaypaw's POV; hopefully, you enjoy the rest of the story! I'm excited to get a little farther! Also, I want to add after a comment from my amazing reader Tigrisfang, that the punishment was a little harsh towards Jaypaw and Blossompaw, since they are just kits, so I added a few sentences here and there to make it seem the warriors sympathized with them more, though they were all still pretty angry.

Question #1: Did you like seeing from Jaypaw's POV?

Question #2: Do you think Acornstar and the warriors overreacted or was it justified?

Chapter Twelve

This chapter takes place in about the middle of the last one.

Ravenpaw watched Jaypaw sleep soundly by their terrified sister, his gray muzzle rested on her white shoulders, while her black head was hidden beneath her dark paws. He could still remember her horrified face as she quietly explained what she had seen on the patrol. He shivered at the thought of seeing such a thing.

"Ravenpaw, she'll be fine." Mossrain walked up next to him and flicked his apprentice's back with his short tail. "We need to get going; we don't want to leave Sandflight waiting." The gray tom turned and padded off on confident paws. "You'll like her, Sandflight. She can be a little rude at times, but she's sweet at heart. Afterall, you can't be a medicine cat if you don't care about others. Though, Sandflight's mentor, Finchnose, *definitely* had some problems with caring about her patients' feelings. She was a little harsh most times!" Mossrain purred happily.

Ravenpaw let out a small huff through his nose, his tail flicking lightly. He was getting scared about meeting the medicine cats for the first time. He would meet up with them at least twice a moon; once on the journey to the Star Cave, and the other on the full-moon Gathering. He would grow up alongside these cats, get advice from them on how to heal his Clan. And one day he would have to go there by himself...

"Let's head out, shall we?" Mossrain padded quietly to Willowpaw and sniffed her ear, then he turned and trotted from the den. Ravenpaw paused to look at his littermates, praying to StarClan that Willowpaw would brighten up again. Then he followed his mentor into the clearing. The dark moonlight shined down on him, lighting his jet black pelt with silver streaks. He rolled his shoulders in the cool air, then he followed Mossrain.

A few warriors were still resting in the clearing, most having fallen asleep after eating. Ravenpaw followed his mentor over to the

fresh-kill pile and watched him pick through the leftover prey until he found a plump mouse. Taking the mouse in his jaws, he headed for the forest entrance. "Why are we bringing prey? Didn't you eat earlier?" He recalled the vole scent on his mentor's blood-stained muzzle.

"It's not for me," the tom replied, his mew muffled, "It's for Sandflight. She doesn't like to talk about it, but BatClan is having some problems with prey. I always bring her something to eat, to help her to the Star Cave."

"Is their whole Clan hungry?" Ravenpaw murmured, his tail flicking.

"Sadly," Mossrain replied.

Ravenpaw paused. They were almost down the pathway, and he watched Mossrain jump onto the grass, turning his head back to look at him curiously. Flicking his ear, the apprentice turned and bounded up back into camp, heading over to the fresh-kill pile and finding a large squirrel. Taking it in his jaws, he hurried back to Mossrain. He didn't say anything as his apprentice jumped down next to him, but he did nod approvingly before starting off.

Ravenpaw kept his grip on the prey soft so he didn't break the skin. Whoever had caught it had broken its neck without drawing blood, so it would stay fresh during the night, allowing Sandflight to bring it back to her Clan. Hopefully, he could help them a bit. If they would accept it. He knew many cats would be too proud to accept help from others.

The black apprentice decided to stay quiet as they traveled through the forest, his paws stepping softly on the orange and yellow leaves that were slowly floating down to the ground. Mossrain was right in front of him, bouncing happily over roots and skipping through small gaps in the undergrowth. Ravenpaw couldn't help feeling joyful at his mentor's mood, and soon he was pouncing after Mossrain, pawing down the leaves he threw up with his paws.

Noticing this, Mossrain purposely pawed a few leaves high into the air, and Ravenpaw stretched high to bat them down back to the ground. His mentor purred with amusement, then he leaped away

and disappeared behind some brush. Ravenpaw's anxiety rose for a moment until he could see his mentor's gray coat again.

Their journey through the forest seemed short, and they arrived at the edge of the forest next to the Thunderpath before long. Ravenpaw looked curiously at the dark path, his ears twitching and his nose curling at the bad smell. He knew it was abandoned; it had been for a long time. Since the Twoleg Place fire, he believed.

"Looks like Sandflight is running late," Mossrain meowed, dropping his mouse next to his paws. He settled down and wrapped his tail around himself, flicking his ears. "Any stories you want to hear while we wait? I know a great one about Pebblepeak's warrior assessment. He messed up so bad, but somehow he was still given his new name!" The gray tom let out a purr of amusement.

"Can I hear about the fire, maybe?" Ravenpaw put his squirrel down and licked his whiskers, trying to get rid of the few hairs the prey left on his muzzle. He had heard the story as a kit from Berrywhisker, but it was hard to remember all the details. His heart burned for a moment from thinking about the dead elder, but he pushed it away.

"Oh, the Great Fire!" Mossrain purred and kneed the ground with excitement. "A fascinating story! It was around the start of the four Clans, back when our numbers were low and our rules were seldom followed so nicely. It was on the night of the full moon when the storm ca--" the tom cut himself off and stood, mewing a greeting over to BatClan's territory.

Ravenpaw turned towards the Thunderpath, ears flicking, and his breath caught in his throat. He had expected to see a large, powerful cat with hard eyes like the stories from his elders, but what he saw was a small tan she-cat with jutting ribs and a limp from a front paw. Her muscles were soft like a kit's and her eyes were weak, with her cheekbones seemingly much too big for her face.

"Sandflight, it's nice to see you!" Mossrain raised his tail in greeting, and the she-cat returned it with a weak flick of her tail. She stepped up to the side of the Thunderpath and looked up and down it, then

she tottered across unsteadily, and she got even smaller as she came up close. She wasn't much bigger than Mossrain, though he had a thicker build and stronger shoulders.

"You don't have to bring prey for me, Mossrain," the she-cat meowed in a dry, raspy meow that made her sound like a thirsty elder.

"Nonsense, Sandflight!" Mossrain fluffed out his fur. "We both know you need it; you need to tell Dawnstar that if she asks we'll help you. Our forest is filled with prey."

"Dawnstar is too proud," Sandflight murmured, slowly getting into a crouch and pulling the mouse close. She paused as she suddenly noticed Ravenpaw. "An apprentice? Already?" She looked up at Mossrain.

The tom nodded happily. "Ravenpaw's a natural." He flicked his tail at his apprentice. "He reminds me of myself when I was young."

"Oh, so you before you were so talkative?" The she-cat let out a dry purr, then she turned to the black apprentice. "Enjoy Mossrain's talking while it lasts. You realize how quiet everything is when he's not around. No stories to pass the time," she meowed quietly.

Ravenpaw let out a small snort of amusement, though he couldn't muster anything else. He was a little scared of the she-cat, even though she looked incredibly weak. Would she even get to the Star Cave? If she made it from their camp, maybe. . . *But why is she so skinny?* he thought. Mossrain said they were having trouble finding prey, but not so bad they looked like skin pulled tightly over bones? How would they survive leaf-bare?

"How's Ashbreeze? Has she kitted yet?" Mossrain cut into Ravenpaw's thoughts, and he looked up, curious. Mossrain lowered his head and added to him, "Ashbreeze is a queen in BatClan."

"Yes, she did." Sandflight blinked then took another bite of her mouse, and Ravenpaw could hear her stomach yowling for more. "Two tomkits and one she-kit." The she-cat cleaned her muzzle and sat up, even though half her mouse was still there.

"Eat the entire thing, Sandflight," Mossrain meowed, nudging the half-eaten prey towards her.

"Ashbreeze will need it," the BatClan medicine cat replied instantly. "And her kits."

"She can have this." Mossrain nodded to Ravenpaw, and he grabbed the squirrel from the grass. "Surely you smelled it?" His mentor added.

"Of course I did," Sandflight admitted. "I just didn't want to assume you brought it for me. It's too much."

"No, it's not." Mossrain's voice was firm. "Ravenpaw decided to bring it by himself. It's a gift to your Clan; a congratulation to Ashbreeze and her kits."

"Thank you," Sandflight muttered, her ears flattening in embarrassment, and she leaned down and scarfed down her mouse, her eyes blazing with starvation, and Ravenpaw scooted back.

"We'll bury the squirrel here, and you can get it on the way back," Mossrain decided, then looked up through the trees. "We better start heading before we're late."

Sandflight cleaned her jaws with her tongue and a paw, then nodded in agreement. "Thank you; both of you." She looked at Ravenpaw with gratitude, then she dug into the ground and tucked the squirrel in, covering it with soil and flattening it down so it remained safe and warm. With a nod of his head, Mossrain led them out from the cover of the trees.

A strong scent from his Clan waved over Ravenpaw, then it was followed by the rich, sharp scent of SageClan. They were crossing the border, into the other Clan's territory, and he peeked past Mossrain's side to see that down a low slope, a large rock covered what looked like a small hollow in the ground. It was tall and smooth and rounded, and he could see a small entrance to the side, while holes littered around the top of the stone.

His paws shivered with excitement as they padded on, and

Sandflight looked back at him, a dry purr rasping in her throat. "It's very exciting to see the Star Cave for the first time. Only leaders and medicine cats are allowed unless special circumstances present themselves. I can still remember my first time seeing the stars shine."

Ravenpaw looked at her, his heart starting to loosen. The she-cat wasn't any different than his Clanmates, except for her weight. And the sour, watery smell coming from her dirty pelt. He also noticed her paws were stained with mud halfway up her legs, and her tail tip was darkened, too. His mind flashed into the memories of Goldenpool talking about the Star Cave, back when she had first joined the nursery.

Apparently, when the half-moon shined right above the Star Cave, it shined down into the cave and bounced of sparkling stones and sent rays of light shining into a stream that passed through it. It made the water shine like the night sky and it felt like they were up with the stars. His paws started to itch to get there faster, then his anxiety took over.

What if the stones didn't sparkle, showing that StarClan was unhappy with him? What if StarClan rejected him? *No, Echo visits me! That means I'm accepted, right?* Maybe he would get visited by her and see another vision of the past, maybe of Sage kitting. That would be cool to see, to compare it to Goldenpool's. His mind changed direction and thought of the vision that showed the lump on her side. *I hope it won't hurt her,* he thought, his tail flicking scaredly.

"Ravenpaw, you okay?" Mossrain was looking back at him, tripping slightly as they started down the slope. But he seemed not to notice despite almost falling. "You have nothing to worry about. StarClan knows you'll grow up to be a good medicine cat."

A good medicine cat. Not a great medicine cat, but a good one, the apprentice thought sourly, then tossed around the idea of throwing himself off a cliff. As long as he was a good medicine cat—as long as that, he would be useful. He would be useful to his Clanmates, and not a burden... Right?

"Just wait until you see the Star Cave," Mossrain interrupted his thoughts once again. "It's so, so beautiful! I'm always so anxious to come and see the rocks shine. Just to watch the moonlight from within is beautiful, but when everything lights up—" Mossrain squealed like a kit and gave a little bounce. "—Oh, it's just so amazing!"

Ravenpaw gave a little mew of agreement, flicking his ear, but he didn't say or do anything else. He cast his gaze at the unfamiliar moorland, watching the few bushes and ferns rustle from the cool wind, and his eyes spotted a rabbit streaking over a hill and down into a burrow. A heartbeat later, a cat burst out, and they slid to a stop at the burrow entrance, lashing their tail. Two other SageClan cats appeared, and one pointed out Ravenpaw and the older medicine cats.

He got scared they would chase them off, but instead, they raised their tails in greeting, then they bounded off together. "Bad luck," Mossrain commented. "Usually they go into the burrows, but that one is much too small and they would most likely lose it; it got quite a head start. But SageClan cats are easily the best hunters on the moor, they know how to work together and when you go to your first Gathering, you'll notice they're all very nicely fed." Mossrain flicked his tail.

"Doesn't sound like bad luck to me," Sandflight muttered, lashing her tail and flicking her ears. "Sounds pretty good, actually. Being able to fail a hunt but still able to eat something." Her eyes flashed with sadness and anger.

"Sorry," Mossrain apologized, his ears flicking nervously. "Remember, Acornstar said she'd help you if Dawnstar allowed it. She'll let you and your Clan hunt in the far forest until you're stronger."

"We can't follow her demand," Sandflight meowed. "It's too much for us to pay."

Ravenpaw looked at them, curious. What had Acornstar asked the BatClan warriors to do? Finding his voice, he mewed, "what did Acornstar want?"

Mossrain flicked his tail on the apprentice's muzzle. "That information is for senior warriors and full medicine cats, young one," he meowed. Ravenpaw waited for his mentor to continue, but he surprisingly stopped the sentence there. Though, after a moment, he did add a quick, "keep this information to yourself; it's private between Dawnstar and Acornstar."

"Yes, Mossrain," he mewed quickly. He had hoped Mossrain would ramble on and possibly give away some information, but it seemed he was keeping his jaws shut tightly about this. *It must be serious,* he thought, then began trying to think of the possibilities it could be. But his mind fell short immediately. BatClan was clearly unable to help themselves, so what could they do for EchoClan? Each Clan had things they were known the best for; EchoClan warriors were the best at stalking and hunting prey in the thick undergrowth; SageClan was the best at running and hunting on the moor; CrowClan was tricky and amazing fighters; then BatClan was quick and good of hearing and scent.

What could they have that Acornstar wants? Even if BatClan was stronger, what could they do for EchoClan that is so extreme the starving Clan wouldn't accept?

"Ah, we're here!"

Ravenpaw looked up at Mossrain meow, slowing to a stop, and stared forward. They were nearing the bottom of a slope, the rest of the territory hidden by another rise. Before them was a huge stacking of boulders, giant stones leaned against each other, with two stones resting against each other and creating an opening like a giant yawning mouth.

At the entrance, Ravenpaw saw the ground inside sloped downward a few mouse lengths, the floor inside a soft, bright sand. He slipped down after Mossrain, his paws sinking into sand, and he looked around with awe. The boulders had created a small sanctuary inside, an opening at the between a few boulders spilling silver moonlight into the area, reflecting off a small stream trickling past at the back of the cave, coming from a break in the rocks and disappearing underground. The bottom of the stream was small, sparkling stones that seemed to shine like independent moons.

"It's beautiful..." he murmured, gazing around, and Mossrain purred.

"Just wait for the moon to get to its peak," Mossrain mewed, his eyes shining with excitement and love of the strange cave.

"Hey, Mossrain!"

The three cats turned their heads around to see two new cats padding up to the Star Cave's entrance. One was a lithe-bodied, long-legged tan-brown tabby she-cat with happy yellow eyes, and the other was a small, muscular ginger she-cat with unreadable yellow eyes and long, sharp glowing-white teeth that showed when she opened her mouth for the greeting. Ravenpaw noticed the brown tabby had a heap of herbs in her jaws.

"Hawkstream! Poppysong! Nice to see you!" Mossrain gave a little bounce and padded up and out of the Star Cave. Ravenpaw scrambled out beside him, though Sandflight sat down to wait, licking the leftovers of her prey off her jaws.

"It's so nice to see you again!" The brown tabby sat down the herbs and moved forward, touching Mossrain's cheek with her nose, then she looked over at Ravenpaw. "And who might you be? Did Sandflight get an apprentice?" She looked behind them over to the quiet tan she-cat.

"No, I did. This is Ravenpaw." Mossrain nodded down to him.

"Nothing happened to Goldenpool, I hope?" the brown tabby said, sounding worried.

"No, she's quite fine! She had her kits a few sunrises ago; two healthy she-kits and one healthy tom! Ravenpaw really wanted to be a medicine cat and with Goldenpool out of commission for a while, it'll be great to have some extra paws to help out. Oh, is that the hawkweed?" Mossrain, being himself more than ever, padded over to the herbs the she-cat had dropped and began sniffing them.

Ravenpaw remembered back to when he had first asked Mossrain to be his apprentice—only a quarter moon ago—and he had mentioned the SageClan medicine cat Poppysong was going to give

them hawkweed. Just earlier in the day, Mossrain had told him the hawkweed would be used in case of leaf-fall colds so catmint wouldn't be wasted so soon.

"The moon is almost high!" Sandflight called from the Star Cave, and Mossrain gave a jump high into the air, turning so when he landed he was facing the other medicine cats.

"Come on, Ravenpaw, time for the ceremony!" He hurried from the grass and down into the hollow, tail high. "Come stand by the stream!"

Poppysong scoffed and went to grab the herbs, while Ravenpaw hurried to his mentor, excitement and fear rushing through his pelt. He was going to be an official medicine cat apprentice! Then something hit him that made him stumble into his stop next to Mossrain. This would be the last chance if he decided to become a warrior's apprentice instead. He could follow this path, under Mossrain's talkative lead, until he became the primary healer of his Clan.

Or...

Or he could throw the last quarter moon away and train with Blossompaw... Maybe she would talk to him again... Not hate him anymore. His mind flashed back to when he was a young kit, back to when she had played with him by chasing moss balls or tussling lightly. Back when they were close... When they were side by side. *"Blossomkit, what do you think about medicine cats?"* he remembered asking her one day.

"Well, they're obviously just big scaredy cats afraid of getting hurt. The only way to go is being a warrior." Her strong, confident reply had been the only thing—besides his overwhelming fear—that had made him stop from going to Mossrain and asking earlier. He had finally gotten the courage when he knew it would've been his last chance to try.

Would she forgive me? He had betrayed her, hadn't he? By becoming a medicine cat, he betrayed her. Maybe? His head spun with confusion. Mossrain's mew broke his thoughts.

"Ravenpaw, is it your wish to enter the mysterious ways of the medicine cats, guided by StarClan, and to be separated from your Clan by your duty to heal?"

Do I really want to be separated from Blossompaw? Do I really want to risk her never speaking to me again? That was all he got from Mossrain's sentence. Did he really want to do this?

"Ravenpaw," Mossrain hissed under his breath, and they locked eyes. The tom looked a little scared. "Is it your wish to enter the mysterious ways of the medicine cats, guided by StarClan, and to be separated from your Clan by your duty to heal?" he said again.

Is it? He asked himself. The thing he wanted to do since he was a tiny kit, or to be with his sister... Finally, he sucked in his breath and mewed, "yes, it is." *I'm sorry Blossompaw. Please don't hate me forever.*

Mossrain looked relieved. "Then repeat after me: I, Ravenpaw of EchoClan, promise to uphold the medicine cat code for as long as I serve my Clan. I promise to heal any cat that needs healing, whether from another Clan or of loner roots. I promise to serve my Clan with every bit of energy I have, and pray and listen to StarClan for guidance."

Ravenpaw repeated his mentor clearly. Blossompaw couldn't be mad at him for being happy... She couldn't. This is what he wanted to do... She would end up understanding.

"Warriors of StarClan," Mossrain rose his mew high and proud. "I present you with this apprentice. He has chosen to follow the path of a medicine cat, and I ask you to watch over him and guide him through his moons. Grant him your insight and wisdom so that he may understand your ways and heal in accordance with your will."

Mossrain nodded his head to the Moonstream, and Ravenpaw moved forward, crouched down, and stared into the water. *"You will touch your nose to the stream when the moon lights up the Star Cave,"* Mossrain had told him. The other medicine cats crouched down along the stream, then they cast their gaze up to wait. He followed them, his neck uncomfortable in the position, but it didn't last for

long.

The moon appeared through the opening at the tom, and suddenly, the entire Star Cave was shining light the night sky. The strange sparkling rocks were glowing brighter than stars and sending streaks of light into the water, which bounced off the stones and created a peaceful white glow in the air. He gazed around with wonder, watching the sparkling rocks, not even noticing the slight pain in his eyes from the bright lights.

But, then he noticed the other medicine cats leaning down to lap at the water, so he forced his eyes down to his reflection in the water, and he took a soft lap of water. "StarClan, show us your guidance," Hawkstream murmured. Ravenpaw remembered Mossrain telling him the eldest of all the medicine cats would utter the prayer before they started to dream.

Please visit me, he thought and closed his eyes. For a moment, he could still hear the rhythmic breathing of the other medicine cats and the soft lapping of water near his paws, then it faded away into silence.

The quiet disappeared and was replaced by the rustling of air through trees and grass, and he opened his eyes to find himself in the clearing Echo had brought him to the first time they met. Though, the first thing he spotted was Berrywhisker. She was still young, with her coat bright and shining. Her eyes were happy and, ironically, filled with life. "Welcome, Ravenpaw," she meowed.

Right next to her, Chiveclaw sparkled into view, along with the forms of other cats that which he didn't recognize. "Welcome," Chiveclaw meowed, echoed by a few other StarClan cats. One cat, a long-legged large-pawed gray tom with green eyes, stared at Ravenpaw with the expression of a cat that knew him well, even though the apprentice didn't recognize him.

But Ravenpaw just stared silently at Berrywhisker. "I'm sorry you died," he whispered.

Berrywhisker purred. "Don't be, young apprentice. I am happier here than I have been in moons. I'm young, I can hunt, I'm with my mate—"

she looked at Chiveclaw with glowing eyes for a moment "—and my lost kit." She turned her gaze to a young cat that had appeared. It was a young she-cat, maybe seven moons old, with short white fur and large gray patches.

"Ravenpaw."

He turned from his kin to see Echo walking up. "Echo," he murmured.

She nodded. "Welcome to StarClan for the first time, as a real medicine cat apprentice," she meowed. "Hopefully, you will greet us like this for many moons before becoming a member of our ranks. Congratulations, Ravenpaw. Now go and serve your Clan."

The world before him disappeared, and he found himself blinking awake beside the Moonstream. The rocks were no longer sparkling, and instead, pale dawnlight shined in. He looked around sleepily, seeing that the other medicine cats were also blinking awake. For some reason, Ravenpaw felt down. He had expected the visit to be more exciting.

Of course, his heart was lifted after seeing Berrywhisker, and he was incredibly glad it went the way it did, but it also felt a little lower than he thought. He thought it would've been bigger, like a vision or a prophecy or of how a sickness would be coming. But it was peaceful, and he was just accepted. It was... Easy.

I did it, he told himself. *I'm a real medicine cat apprentice.*

So you may have realized that the ceremony that Mossrain said is not even close to the one made by Erin Hunter. But since my medicine cats are so different than Erin Hunter's (i.e. my med cats can have mates) I thought it'd make more sense to change it, and since they've never met the original Clans, it would be weird for them to have the exact same ceremonies, right?

Question #1: How do you like the other medicine cats?

Question #2: What did you think of Ravenpaw becoming a real apprentice?

Chapter Thirteen

"Ravenpaw, did you get accepted?"

The black apprentice raised his head and looked at Mossrain. "Yeah, I did," he mewed.

"Oh, great!" Poppysong bounced to her paws, her ears high and tail flicking excitedly. "I forgot to tell you all, but I also have some good news from my Clan! In two moons, I'll be bringing an apprentice here myself! Icekit is four moons old, and she asked a few sunrises ago to become a medicine cat apprentice!" her mew sounded like a kit squealing.

"Congratulations," Hawkstream mewed softly. "Fawnriver had three kits just two days ago. Hopefully, one of them will be willing to become a medicine cat."

"Good luck!" Mossrain mewed excitedly, then looked at Sandflight. "You mentioned Ashbreeze just had kits as well, do you think you'll take one as an apprentice?"

Sandflight shrugged, taking a few laps of the Moonstream's water while Poppysong mewed, "It looks like all the Clans have been blessed with kits! Hopefully, StarClan will bless us with a kind leaf-bare this season!"

"I'm not so sure," Hawkstream sighed, getting to her paws. "I was warned that whitecough would spread through my Clan in late leaf-fall. Tell your cats to be safe on our borders," she added to Sandflight and Poppysong.

"Thanks for the warning!" Poppysong said happily. "I'll drop off some hawkweed on the border near where the woodland starts for your border patrol to pick up. I'm just absolutely overflowing with the stuff. I'm afraid a lot of it will die before it can be used." She turned to look at Sandflight. "Would you like some hawkweed, too? I can leave it near the Thunderpath behind the Star Cave."

Sandflight looked like she wanted to reject the offer for a moment, then she murmured, "Might as well not waste herbs, right?"

Poppysong purred, "Oh, good! Mossrain, will you need some more?"

"No, we have a good supply of catmint near the river. We'll wait 'till the last moment before harvesting it, and it should last through all of leaf-bare. If you need some, just come by." Mossrain flicked his tail, then also nodded to Hawkstream and Sandflight so they knew the invitation spread to them.

"Thanks!" Poppysong mewed happily, her tail flicking through the air. Ravenpaw could tell easily the young medicine cat was an extremely happy she-cat, and he doubted anything would quench the fire burning in her courageous gaze. Just then, a question formed in his mind, completely off topic. He found his voice once Hawkstream and Mossrain's chatting about horsetail slowed to a stop.

"Hey, Poppysong, so the Star Cave- I mean, um, cats can only come to the cave when their leader says, right?" He swallowed nervously.

"And if the medicine cat agrees." The she-cat nodded.

"Well, I was wondering, is it even possible to know that a cat didn't come here? Like an apprentice... Surely there had to be at least *one* who didn't listen, right...?" He started feeling bad about accusing SageClan apprentices of breaking the rules.

"Oh, more than one!" Poppysong let out a yowl of amusement. "My littermate got in trouble as an apprentice for sneaking here, and just another two apprentices a few sunrises ago."

"What was their punishments?" he asked quietly.

Poppysong looked ready to answer, then stopped herself. "Well, they didn't get off easy, I can say that. Luckly, most cats have learned to behave when it comes to the Star Cave. It's usually the young cats who start to get ahead of themselves, but their mentors smack them into place quickly enough."

Ravenpaw nodded, casting his gaze back to the Star Cave. He

already wanted to see it again, to watch the stones sparkle like an endless amount of tiny moons, reflecting starlight off the water's surface.

"I want to see them again, too," Poppysong meowed, as if she was reading his thoughts. "It's one of the best reasons for becoming a medicine cat. Just imagine seeing the Star Cave on the full moon..." The she-cat's tone was wistful and filled with hope.

Ravenpaw looked at his paws, murmuring, "It would really be a Star Cave, then, right?" He looked back up at her.

She purred, her eyes sparkling with excited thoughts and memories. "Oh, it's a fitting name, isn't it?" Her muscles shook under her short fur, her legs looking like they'd collapse. "It's so beautiful..."

"Well, I guess we should get going," Mossrain's mew broke the beginning of Ravenpaw's answer, and he looked over to see his mentor getting up from a sit and shaking sand from his haunches. "Let's head back for the forest, Ravenpaw! Sandflight, will you join us?"

"No, you go on ahead," Sandflight replied. "Thank you for..." She trailed off and cast her gaze quickly to the other medicine cats before murmuring, "for you know what. I'm going to head straight home, and I'll have a patrol go and grab it, if that's okay."

"That's perfectly okay! The dawn patrol always waits on the border to make sure we get home okay--meaning Goldenpool and me--so I can tell them then! They come from the moorland border and like to make sure that we've returned okay. We'll see you at the next Gathering; tell me if anything else happens with sickness or injuries, we'd be glad to help." He flicked his tail, the white patch over his eye glowing in the pale sunlight, then he flicked his tail at his apprentice and bounded off.

"Goodbye, it was nice meeting you all." Ravenpaw dipped his head respectfully then turned around and hared after his mentor, enjoying the cool rushing wind through his pelt for a few heartbeats before he slowed, having reached Mossrain's side.

"What did you see in StarClan?" his mentor questioned excitedly. "What cats visited you? Did you see Buzzardcloud? He was Goldenpool's mentor a *very* long time ago-he died not soon after she got her name, sadly. He was a good cat, though. I met him when I was accepted and got my full name. He's extremely nice, not too different than you. He had short gray fur with green eyes, and his paws are *huge!* Goldenpool said he often fumbled around with herbs and was quite clumsy!"

As he was speaking, the young tom stumbled over a small vine that lay in the grass. They were drawing close to the forest, and the evidence was clear; brambles beginning to grow, the grass getting thicker, the ground tougher, and the shadows of the trees began to cool their pelts. "I think I saw him. Though, I talked mostly to Berrywhisker and Echo."

"Really?" Mossrain looked quickly at him with bright eyes, taking tall steps to make sure he didn't trip again. "I'm not surprised Echo visited you. I didn't meet her until I became a full medicine cat, but you're special with your powers. And you saw Berrywhisker? How was she? Was she happy?"

"Yeah, she was..." Ravenpaw looked at his paws. He still hadn't told any cat about how Echo visited him and showed him the past. He still kept it from everyone, even his mother. He was already scared that if more cats found out about his visions they would treat him differently, but if they knew he was visited by the Clan's founder? He would be watched every heartbeat.

"Did you see Chiveclaw?"

"He was there, actually!" Ravenpaw began to feel excited talking about what he saw. He felt he didn't see too much, but he was starting to be filled with joy either way. "And Berrywhisker was really young! She said it was her age when Chiveclaw had died. She said she's happy she's not suffering anymore, and that she could hunt again." His heart sparked when he remembered her calm, wise gaze filled with youth and love for her mate and dead kit.

"I'm glad you got to see them both," Mossrain meowed quietly, then he fell still and silent and his ears flicked forward. The tom opened

his mouth and smelled the air, and Ravenpaw mirrored his mentor. His Clan's border markers filled his nose, recently marked. He tried separating scents, but they were all mingled together. "Who's in the patrol?" Mossrain questioned.

"What? Why?" Going through scents was the job of warriors and their apprentices, and it seemed weird for him to know them. He wouldn't need to know, right?

"Every cat needs to know every scent. You need to know every cat, every herb, by their own smell. You need to walk through the forest and find the smallest traces of hidden herbs. Now, who do you smell?"

Ravenpaw moved towards a fern bush on the edge of their territory, and he sniffed deeply at the scents. Instantly, one burned brightly into his scent glands. "Snowfern!" His mother was on the dawn patrol! Before he could try the other scents, there was rustling bracken deeper from the forest and he looked up excitedly. Oakcloud and Brightpaw appeared, followed by Grayblaze and then finally Snowfern.

"Ravenpaw!" The white and black she-cat let out a purr and hurried forward, pressing her muzzle against his. "Did you get accepted as a medicine cat? Not that I doubt you wouldn't be!" She gave his forehead a lick.

"Yes, and he made great friends with the other medicine cats!" his mentor meowed happily.

"That's wonderful, my dear," Snowfern murmured, staring at her son with loving eyes, then she added, "as always, we brought prey for you, Mossrain, and you, my son." She flicked her tail and Brightpaw moved forward, dropping a large shrew in front of the two medicine cats.

"Great! Thank you, Brightpaw." Mossrain licked his lips and took a large bite, then he gave the rest to Ravenpaw and, after swallowing the large morsel, he began speaking. "Ravenpaw did very well, I'm quite proud of him. Oh, and Sandflight gave me some herbs a few sunrises ago and I left a squirrel on the border for her. She's very

kind. You'll see where it is, by our scent near the border. Their border patrol will come by and grab it, so if you scent them over the border there's a reason. Of course, only in that part near the prey, but they could get the place wrong, so just ignore it. And the wind could push it around, so just forget about it!" Mossrain was talking so fast and so much even Ravenpaw couldn't understand.

The rest of the patrol clearly thought the same, but Grayblaze was the only one who looked angry. With narrowed eyes, he meowed, "Mossrain, did I just hear something about ignoring BatClan entering our territory?"

"Why don't you speak a little slower, Mossrain?" Snowfern asked kindly.

The tom nodded, while Ravenpaw cleaned blood from his muzzle with his paws, silently wondering what Mossrain's first try had said. He told them Sandflight had given him herbs, but he didn't mention that before, and neither did the she-cat. Was he lying to the warriors?

"A few sunrises ago, Sandflight gave me some herbs that I was out of, and in return, I decided to give her a squirrel that we had caught. I left it on the BatClan border, buried near the Thunderpath. Since you are all so good at scenting things, I'm sure you'll be able to tell where it is. Anyways, she headed straight home from the Star Cave, so one of their border patrols is gonna come by and grab it. So, when or if you scent them over the border, that is why." Mossrain nodded as he finished, deciding he had done a good job.

Ravenpaw agreed silently, though the patrol looked unhappy, except Snowfern--sadness and sympathy shown lightly in her eyes. Grayblaze looked the most upset. "So BatClan has an excuse to come onto our territory?" the tom hissed, his neck fur bristling. "Now those starving rats can steal from us and no one can tell them off!"

"Hey!" Snowfern's voice was quick and made Ravenpaw flinch. The anger in her mew was shockingly clear, and the young apprentice felt a slight fear of his mother. "Remember that I'm here, Grayblaze!"

The large gray tom looked at her, snorting. "Those cats would steal the pelt off your back for a mouse tail! Psh, they'd probably kill a kit for a good meal."

Snowfern let out a terrifying hiss, though she didn't attack, much to Ravenpaw's surprise. "Watch it, Grayblaze." Her eyes were dark with a deep loathing for the warrior.

I know Grayblaze is wrong about BatClan, but why is Snowfern acting like this? It seemed to go deeper than disrespect for another Clan.

"They're starving over there, they'll eat anything." The tom stalked forward and stood nose to nose with the smaller she-cat. His meow went dark and quiet as he hissed, "isn't that why you left?"

With a terrifying yowl, Snowfern threw herself forward and barreled the large tom over, slashing her long, sharp claws over his face. In his surprise, he couldn't react in time and ended up with a long, bloody scratch over his muzzle. Snowfern stood in front of him, back arched, fur on end, ears flat, her muzzle open and letting out a loud hiss that splattered spit towards the gray warrior.

Snowfern's from BatClan? Ravenpaw faintly remembered hearing something about it when he was a young kit.

Brightpaw began to move forward, clearly wanting to stop the fight, but Oakcloud quickly jumped in front of her. "Don't. Once these two are fighting, we have to wait for them to finish it if we don't have enough warriors to hold them down."

"But Mossrain can help hold someone down!" Brightpaw cried, clearly disliking the battle, and Ravenpaw completely agreed. Watching his mother and Grayblaze face off, staring at each other with absolute hate... His heart was pounding so fast he thought it would burst.

"Be quiet, Brightpaw. Just be quiet..." Oakcloud's mew was suddenly low. His apprentice looked like she still wanted to argue, but forced herself to take a step back and watch with sadness in her eyes.

Snowfern's legs bent as she lowered herself to the ground, ready to

leap when Grayblaze moved. He was standing tall with one leg up, claws shining, his tail lashing. Snowfern's was, too. Then, suddenly, Grayblaze hissed and launched himself forward. Snowfern leaped up and their chests thumped together. They separated before they crashed into the leaves, and Ravenpaw first noticed a scratch on his mother's ear, while Grayblaze's neck was wet with blood from a hidden wound.

Grayblaze launched forward, and Snowfern quickly balanced on her back paws and swiped at the tom's ears. He ducked back then leaped again, going for the she-cat's legs, but when he was about to make contact she flipped herself out of the way. The tom scrambled for a pawhold on the forest floor and managed to stop himself. He turned just as Snowfern reached him, and he clawed at her shoulder.

The she-cat hissed in pain and threw a front paw onto his neck, digging in and pulling down. He released his hold on her to steady himself, and she took the chance to jump forward and barrel him over again. They tumbled back a little bit then ended up in a screeching ball of gray, white, and black.

Fear swept through Ravenpaw like a washing wave. What if Grayblaze hurt Snowfern? What if he seriously injured her? "Please, can't you do something!" he cried to Mossrain, but the tom just continued watching the fight, eyes fearful.

Then Snowfern and Grayblaze separated, deeper into the forest and leaving a trail of destruction behind them. Grayblaze's pelt hid his scars and his coat was dark enough to mostly hide his blood, though it was clear he lost. He crouched low and growled, but didn't try to attack again; it looked like he was holding his paw at an awkward angle. Snowfern was a different case.

Her coat was very short, and her then-white fur was stained deep red in some places then paler in others. Two long claw marks ran down her spine, dripping blood down her sides. Another scratch was on her leg, and it looked like Grayblaze had ripped up one of her ears. But she still stood defiantly above him. "Do you give?" she hissed.

"You're a scavenger just like your old Clanmates." He looked at her with dark eyes, then flinched as she aimed a skilled swipe at his ear, creating a small tear.

"Do. You. Give?"

Grayblaze let out a low growl, then hissed something inaudible under his breath.

"Louder," Snowfern hissed, leaning her head lower.

Grayblaze shot his head up and stared her deep in the eyes. "I give."

Snowfern licked her lips, then turned and stalked away, limping very slightly on the leg with the long scratch. "Let's finish the patrol."

"Nuh uh uh." Mossrain moved forward, now out of his trance. "Both of you are going back to camp to be looked at, *now,*" he added when Snowfern looked like she was going to disagree.

"Brightpaw and I will finish the patrol alone. Go back to camp." Oakcloud jerked his head to the forest, then flicked his tail at his apprentice and slipped away. She cast a quick glance at Snowfern before quietly following.

"Come on, you two. And don't even think about fighting again!" Mossrain padded confidently past some bracken, flicking Grayblaze's face with his tail. "Any injuries caused after now will not be treated."

Ravenpaw fell in beside his mentor, and his mother came up next to him, her head down and her eyes still angry but also a little sad. He pressed against her in hope to make her feel better, while Grayblaze struggled to get to his paws and limped heavily after them, once and awhile letting out small hisses of pain.

They continued to camp in complete silent except for Grayblaze's pained hisses, and Ravenpaw could hear his heart pounding and every little creak in the wood, every scruffle of leaves. Strangely, the mingling sounds calmed his mind. The walk went slow, but it also seemed like no time before he could start to smell the camp. It

was now that he realized how tired he was. Before, he had mostly felt numb, but now knowing he was so close to his nest, he could feel a burning in his leg muscles, a pain in his pads, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

They emerged from the bushes and looked at the pathway that led up to camp, and Ravenpaw felt a bit of fear trickle back into his bones. He was okay with going down, but jumping up the rocks while he was so tired seemed like too much work.

"You really think I'm making it up there with my leg?" Grayblaze hissed.

Mossrain sighed, his tail flicking. "Ravenpaw, take your mother up to the den. Do you remember what to do?" The tom ignored Grayblaze.

"Umm..." He tried to sort through his memories of the last few days. "Use cobwebs to stop bleeding, make a poultice of goldenrod to heal the wound then get rid of the excess herb?" he tried, though he knew there was more to it. He hated the feeling that he might get it wrong in front of his mother.

"Close. Have Snowfern clean her wounds, make sure there's nothing left that could hurt her by using cobwebs; then make a poultice for goldenrod and marigold each; and finally clean around the wound. Do you remember what marigold is for?" Mossrain seemed proud of Ravenpaw despite his mistake.

'There are more herbs that help with infection, like burdock root, dried oak leaves, marigold...' Ravenpaw remembered Mossrain saying the day he had asked to become a medicine cat, and more information began to come back to him.

"It helps stop infections before it starts. Chervil, burdock root, and dried oak leaves also help." He felt excited that he could show his mother what he knew, and he heard a happy purr come from her.

"Good job, Ravenpaw!" Mossrain's eyes glowed. "Now, bring Snowfern to the medicine cats den, but first call to a few warriors to come down and help me."

"Okay," Ravenpaw mewed, flicking his tail, then he turned and started up the path. Instantly, the rocks hurt his pads and his muscles burned from taking large steps, and he was happy to stay slow to let his mother stay close to him.

"You're doing great, little one," Snowfern murmured, her icy blue-green eyes soft and loving. He looked down, giving a quick lick to his chest fur. He had done good with the second question, but he completely missed the first. If Mossrain hadn't asked him what to do he could've gotten his mother's wound infected!

He stayed quiet until they got up into the clearing, then he cast his bright owl-like eyes around. The first cat he saw was Frostfall, resting on the Rock Pile and licking one of her front paws. "Frostfall!" he called, but the she-cat didn't hear him. He knew she had troubles hearing, so he called again louder, and she finally turned her head over.

"Snowfern? What happened?" the she-cat scrambled from the rock and bounded towards them, sniffing the other she-cat before bringing back her head. "You don't smell like another Clan; did Grayblaze say something to you?"

I didn't know Snowfern and Grayblaze's relationship was so open, Ravenpaw thought. He hadn't remembered hearing too much about it besides them not getting along too well. "Yeah, and he hurt his paw. Mossrain needs help getting him up here," the apprentice added, forcing his mew loud so the she-cat could hear him.

"Great StarClan." She rolled her eyes then turned around, her eyes searching the clearing. It was empty, but she called loudly, "Stonecoat!" and a few heartbeats later he emerged from the warriors' den. "Grayblaze hurt his paw; come help get him into camp!" She turned and disappeared. Stonecoat stumbled tiredly forward but didn't follow the white warrior. Instead, he stopped in front of his mother.

"Are you okay?" he meowed worriedly, sniffing at the long claw marks down her spine.

"I'm fine, just a squabble with Grayblaze. Go help him up here to

the medicine cat's den. And don't be mean to him, he's already learned his lesson." She touched his nose with her's then padded off with her younger son at her side, and he heard her mutter under her breath, "for now."

Ravenpaw ignored it and slipped into the medicine cat's den, his eyes instantly falling on Willowpaw, curled up alone in her temporary nest. *Where's Jaypaw?* Hadn't he promised to watch Willowpaw? He padded over to her nest and sniffed around, finding his brother's scent faint but Goldenpool's stronger. She had probably visited Willowpaw to make sure she was okay. He also saw a leaf nearby with the smooth, sweet scent of a poppy. She had given Willowpaw more poppy seeds so she slept longer.

"Is she okay?" Snowfern murmured, stepping forward and giving her kit a sniff, and Ravenpaw couldn't help but wince at the strong smell of blood coming from his mother, and he noticed that Willowpaw did, too, though she didn't wake from sleep.

"Yeah, I think so. You can use a nest over here." He turned quietly to an unused nest near the entrance to the other den and made sure it was ready to be used as bedding, then he directed his mother to lay down and headed for the herb store. *It feels weird to tell her what to do,* he thought, taking in a big breath then slowly letting it out. But he decided to bring the thought back up later and focused on healing her.

He looked back, and he saw she was licking her wounds like he was going to ask her to do, and so he turned back to the store. He picked out goldenrod by the bright yellow flowers, then tracked marigold by strong, bitter odor that rose from the crevice it was hidden in. After getting a bit of both, he took them gently in his jaws then padded over to the corner and pawed up some cobwebs that had been gathered and cleaned beforehand.

Taking them back to his mother, he lay them down and then began chewing up some marigold, flinching at the awful taste, and Snowfern purred softly, eyes filled with love. Once he thought it was done, he almost spat it on his paw, then remembered something Goldenpool had told him when he visited her and her kits. *When you make a poultice, spit it on your pad, but make sure to*

wash it first so you don't infect the wound.

He continued chewing the leaves and went over the small pool of water, sticking his paw in and waving it around. The water felt icy on his scraped pads, but he ignored it pulled out his paw, shaking it around in an attempt to dry it off. He limped awkwardly back to his mother, who let out a low purr, and he just stopped himself from licking at his chest, the bitter poultice in his mouth reminding him.

He spat it down onto his paw, making sure to get all of it off his tongue, then he reached forward and gently touched one of the claw marks on her back; he didn't need to clean it of blood because Snowfern's licking had already done it. His mother flinched when it touched her open skin, and he instantly shot his paw away.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you!" He didn't know how he could make it not hurt.

"Ravenpaw," she murmured softly, "you need to get past your fear. You have to be hurt before you can heal. And besides, I know the herbs will make my wound better; I've been hurt worse." Her eyes suddenly sparked with old memories. He nodded, curious but not wanting to pry. He touched the scratch again, and though she flinched, he didn't pull his paw away too much.

He gently rubbed the poultice into the bloody wound, and he felt bile rise in his throat. How could they deal with this pain? His mother's face was twisted and she curled her lips sometimes when he hit sensitive spots, but other than that she was relaxed. She was so used to the pain it hurt his heart. Shaking the dark thoughts away, he finished rubbing in the marigold and cleaned his paw, almost retching from the taste of blood. His *mother's* blood.

He closed his eyes, let out a breath, then reached down and began chewing the goldenrod. He noticed the wound on his mother's leg was beginning to bleed again and he started to worry, but then she began rasping her tongue over it, and it slowly stopped, though she continued cleaning it. Once he thought the poultice was done, he spat it into his paw-which he hadn't let touch the ground in fear of getting it dirty-then started rubbing it into the second poultice.

Instead of flinching, Snowfern let out a grateful sigh and sunk lower into the nest, and he was glad he didn't hurt her again. Once he finished rubbing in the goldenrod, he grabbed some cobwebs and cleaned up some of the poultices from her fur, since his job was rather messy and the chewed marigold and goldenrod had moved off the wound.

He still had a small amount of unchewed marigold and goldenrod, but he was only getting close to picking up the marigold leaves when he heard pawsteps and smelled more blood, and he turned to see Mossrain and Stonecoat helping Grayblaze into the den. The large gray tom seemed rather unhappy and didn't give any thanks when he was lowered into a nest across the den. *Probably so they don't get into an argument,* Ravenpaw thought.

"How'd you do?" Mossrain padded over, while Stonecoat gave a light growl to the senior warrior lying in the nest before padding over and settling down behind his mother's nest, watching Ravenpaw with proud eyes as he heard Mossrain speak. "Nice job, Ravenpaw. You could've used some more marigold-we don't have a lot, but Snowfern's back wounds are deep and need to heal. You'll be taken off warrior duties for a few days, but should be back soon with rest," the medicine cat added to the warrior.

"Thank you, Mossrain," she replied softly.

"You should thank Ravenpaw!" He turned to look at his apprentice. "I'll finish her, while I want you to go grab comfrey and a lot of cobwebs. I also want you to grab soaked moss balls for each of them." He looked back at Snowfern and picked up the marigold, beginning to chew it. Ravenpaw looked at his older brother for a few moments before going over to the store.

Did Mossrain ever teach me on comfrey? he thought, getting nervous. He didn't want to ask in front of all these cats! They would think he wasn't cut out to be a medicine cat. *But he asked for comfrey, so I need to give him comfrey...* "Mossrain, what *is* comfrey?" he asked quietly.

"Oh, I forgot you haven't learned about it yet!" The tom spat the poultice onto his paw. "Comfrey roots are used for wrenched

muscles, which Grayblaze has in his paw. I'll have you chew it as much as you can into a pulp-same as a poultice- then I'll rub it over his paw and clean up his wounds with cobwebs. His fur is so long the blood gets messy and clumps it together, so his wounds will be harder to get to, and that's why I'll do them, but I want you to watch to know how to do it..."

As Mossrain continued to ramble on about StarClan knows what, Ravenpaw waited for him to quiet down, then meowed, "but what does it look like?"

Mossrain let out a *mrrow* of amusement. "I completely forgot about that part! They're black roots; they don't really have a smell, but I guess I would say kinda like a tree but also soil. You'll know 'em when you see 'em!" He picked up goldenrod and began chewing excitedly.

Ravenpaw couldn't help but let out a small purr, then he went over to the storage area and searched through, quickly finding the black roots sticking out from a small crack in the stone. He grabbed them and began chewing as he made his way over to Grayblaze next to the den entrance, but he spotted something in the clearing and padded over to look. He was surprised to see his littermates, Jaypaw and Blossompaw, stalking towards the apprentices' den from the camp entrance. Petalpaw and Flamepaw were in front of them, and Ravenpaw also noticed that Thorntail was now sitting at the camp entrance.

Where did they go? He heavily doubted his littermates' mentors would let them go out with just two other apprentices and one very young warrior. *Jaypaw, what was so important you had to leave our sister by herself?*

Question #1: What is your opinion of Snowfern after reading this chapter?

Question #2: What is your opinion of Grayblaze after reading this chapter?

Chapter Fourteen

"Come on, wake up, you lazy lump!"

Rowanpaw grunted as a sharp paw prodded his skinny side, sending pain through his stomach. He forced his tired eyes open, flinching them closed as the dry air burned them. Once he was able to look around with blurry vision, he saw Birchsplash standing over him, one soot-stained paw raised.

"Finally!" The tom snorted, then stepped back and padded heavily away. Rowanpaw sleepily raised his head and looked around, letting out a large yawn. He was extremely disappointed when he saw the sun was barely appearing over the horizon. The dawn patrol would probably just be leaving back at camp.

"We didn't go to sleep until moonhigh; why are we waking up so early?" he complained, letting out another loud yawn, then coughed uncomfortably when his dry throat cracked and burned.

"We have to keep moving," Hazelfur responded, "to keep our chests clear of this soot. Emberheart especially."

Rowanpaw looked over at his mentor as she snorted heavily. Her fur was ruffled and stained dark, and her eyes looked dry. "I'm fine, Hazelfur. Stop treating me like a kit." Despite her strong words, her voice was cracked and hoarse, and she broke into a small fit of coughing afterward.

"If you weren't so stubborn I would've made you go home days ago!" Hazelfur replied good-humouredly, her tail flicking, though Rowanpaw sensed she was covering up the truth with her playful meow. She sounded worried like she actually believed Emberheart should go home, and the apprentice silently agreed, looking at his mentor in despair.

Her stomach had started to round after they got her to eat a finch they had caught, but she was constantly coughing and she seemed

to be the most affected by the sooty-air. *Could it harm the kits?* he thought scaredly, tail tip twitching. *No, they're fine. Emberheart needs the prey.* They had only been on the journey for about five days, but they had been eating better, though it came at a price. Their pads were raw, their throats were burning, their eyes dry, and the air was thick and hard to breathe in. He doubted many of his Clanmates would be able to hunt here, especially if they had to jump over the sparkling pebbles at the entrance of the Twolegplace *and* climb the fallen den. Rowanpaw didn't even know how they would get out.

"Come on, let's start moving!" Birchsplash sounded cheery despite the hoarse sound in his throat and the dry cough he gave after he spoke, though he still stayed high, padding from the small place they had settled for the night in between two Twoleg dens, hidden behind tall shiny, cold silver rocks that were stained black in most places.

"Hopefully we'll find something to eat." Rowanpaw groaned at the thought of fresh meat in his belly. He had taken the least amount of prey during their journey so far; only a soot-stained mouse two days before. Hazelfur and Birchsplash had shared two mice, and a young rabbit. Emberheart, on the other hand, had been given two mice, the mother rabbit of the one her littermates ate, and a finch. Altogether, it was the almost the same amount of prey the whole Clan shared every quarter moon. *How does this place have more prey than our territory?* he thought sadly.

"Rowanpaw, you coming?" Hazelfur called, and he looked up to see the group already on the Thunderpath, tails flicking in wait.

"Just give me a heartbeat to wake up!" he snapped, grumpy that he was being rushed, and Hazelfur gave a snort but didn't say anything. After he had stretched out his legs and back, he shook out his coat then padded to his mentor. "I'm here, so let's go."

"Well, somebody's a grumpy mouse!" Birchsplash purred with amusement, then broke out in a coughing fit. Hazelfur held back her own purr, choking on her dry, cracked tongue. The she-cat flicked her tail then started down the Thunderpath, with her littermates right behind them. Rowanpaw took up the back, taking

a quick glance behind him. The pine tree tops had faded from sight, replaced with rows and rows of burnt Twoleg dens, showing nothing of the only home he knew.

Yes, he didn't like the dark, murky territory that he lived in, but he had never seen anything else; never known anything else. Except when he went to his first Gathering, not far from the Old Thunderpath in EchoClan territory. He couldn't really remember anything that happened, all he remembered was the way he loved the hard, tough soil under paw and the thick leaves above him. He remembered all the sweet, mysterious smells around him, so different than the dank, sour scent of his territory.

I want Blazepaw, he thought, his heart clenched as he thought of his brother. They had been together every single day since they were born, but now he hadn't seen his brother for five days, and he anxiously wondered what his brother felt when he found out Rowanpaw had lied to him about the border patrol, that he had actually left to go on a mission for the Clan without even telling him...

"Rowanpaw, are you okay?" Emberheart had slowed to walk next to him, while Hazelfur and Birchsplash hurried forward until they were about two fox-lengths away to let them have peace.

"I can't stop thinking about Blazepaw," he murmured truthfully. "What if something happens to him when I'm gone? What if he starves, or gets attacked by a fox?" Worry spiked through his muscles, and he had to hold back from thundering home just to look at his brother for a moment.

"StarClan will keep him safe until you return," Emberheart promised, flicking his back with her tail.

He snorted scornfully. "And what has StarClan ever done to us? They've let us starve for countless moons; they won't start caring now."

Emberheart's eyes filled with pain and sadness. "Rowanpaw, StarClan cannot do everything."

He stopped, his fur beginning to bristle, and he looked at her with hard eyes. "You just said they would keep Blazepaw safe, and now they can't do anything?" Impatientness filled him as he waited for an answer.

"You know that's not what I meant," Emberheart meowed, ear flicking. Rowanpaw's whiskers twitched as he tried to stop his muzzle from curling.

"Just stop trying to defend them, okay? They either can't or won't do anything for us. They're just waiting for us to die." He lashed his tail and padded forward, leaving his mentor behind. Despite having a large space, he shoved Birchsplash aside and stalked past them. "I'm going hunting!" he hissed.

He got into a quick trot, ignoring the pain in his pads, and slipped inside the wreckage of an old Twoleg den, hearing an angry meow from Birchsplash saying, "stop being such a fox-heart, Rowanpaw! Learn to enjoy life, okay?"

What life? he thought. *All we do is survive. I've never got to enjoy anything!* Even tussling with his brother was practice; practice for a future battle. Ever since they were tiny kits playing, apprentices and warriors would come by and tell them that their moves would be good in battle one day, or their pounces would help catch prey. Nothing was to do with living! It was all just surviving to suffer another day!

He looked at the den, watching the tall black walls and getting his surroundings. The roof was gone, open to the sky, and half the walls were gone, burned into black piles. One wall was standing in the middle of the den, blocking the other half off from his view, and he didn't know if he wanted to go over into the unknown.

Growling softly, Rowanpaw sniffed around at the blackened wood, wheezing breathlessly as dust filled his dry mouth. "I'll never scent prey this deep into the Twolegplace!" he hissed. The fire was worse here, and it was impossible to smell anything, and the dark, dusty air made his eyes burn, so it was also hard to see.

He had to focus on his hearing. All was silent, not even the stir of

the wind. Then, he heard something. A small, young squeak of a mouse, hidden inside a large pile of black wood. He looked around through small holes, though there was no way to get inside from where he was. He looked over at the wall that still stood; it seemed that maybe the mouse was reachable over there. Fear ran through his muscles, but he shook it away and slunk quietly through a large opening, peeking out the other side.

It was charred and empty, though he did notice a small pink tail sticking out from a large pile of wood—what he had seen from the other side of the den. He crouched low, remembering all that Emberheart had taught him, and he slowly stepped forward. He kept his paws soft, breathing slow and quiet. He focused everything he had on the small creature, his heart pounding in his chest. He crept around until he could see the full body, then he got ready to pounce.

He flicked his ear, then launched himself from the ground, soaring through the air, and landed right behind it. It tried to run, but he shot his paw forward and dug his claws into its back. It squealed, and he cut it off with a quick nip to its neck. Hunger yowled at him to take it for himself, but he didn't even get the chance to think about it.

"Hey! That was mine!"

He whipped around, fur on end, hissing, and he found himself staring at a large, skinny dark brown tabby tom, his eyes dark brown and unreadable.

"Who are you?" Rowanpaw growled, fur bristling, though he did notice the other tom didn't look threatened—his fur was low and his tail was barely flicking.

"It doesn't matter. That mouse is mine, I need it." His whiskers twitched from the mouse's sweet smell.

"You look healthy enough," Rowanpaw snapped back. The tom was skinny, but it was clear he wasn't as starving as Rowanpaw was. "Go find something else!" He knew he wouldn't win a fight against the tom—he was a lot older and most likely had more fighting

experience than him, but he didn't want to risk calling for Emberheart. He would have to hope she heard him.

"Listen." The tom seemed to calm, though his tail tip was still flicking. "You're barely older than a kit. Let me help you," he meowed, trying to take a step forward, but after Rowanpaw growled deeply at him, he stopped. "You're not out here by yourself, are you?"

"Why do you want to know?" He stiffened, raising his voice in hope that one of his Clanmates would hear him. He had been quite rude to them when he left, and he hoped they hadn't gone too far without him. What if this tom decided he needed to prey enough to attack? He would have no way to defend himself, but Emberheart needed this mouse; more than the tom did.

"I can tell on how you're speaking that you have a group. Are they your parents, or your siblings?" The tom tilted his head slightly, speaking like he was talking to a tiny kit on their first time out of the nursery.

"I don't have parents!" he growled, fur standing on end, and the tom dipped his head in apology.

"Sorry. Where is your group?" The tom's tail flicked softly, eyes still unreadable, and Rowanpaw felt his muscles stiffen even more. Why did this tom want to know so much?

But, the young apprentice didn't get to answer. He heard a hiss, and whipped around to see Emberheart, Hazelfur, and Birchsplash approaching, fur raised and ears flat. They came to stand next to him, tails lashing, and the strange brown tabby took a few steps back.

"I don't mean any harm to you all," the tom meowed, lowering his head in a sign of submission.

"Then leave!" Birchsplash's neck fur puffed and he took a step forward, moving protectively in front of his Clanmates, and Rowanpaw felt a flash of respect for the young warrior. This tom looked the age of a senior warrior, but the warriors likely knew

more about battle moves than the stranger.

"My mate needs that mouse," he admitted, eyes lowering to look at his paws. "She has three two moon old kits and they need food to survive. Please, they haven't eaten since the last sunset."

"Our cat caught it, and we need it, too!" Hazelfur hissed, stepping forward bravely.

The tom looked at them, desperate. "Please. We have water at our camp—clean water! If you let us have the mouse, you may stay at our camp to rest and drink and clean out your fur. With all of you to help us, I'm sure we could find enough prey to feed us all; my cats and yours." He was directing his speech to Birchsplash, assuming he was the group leader. Emberheart was actually supposed to be, but it seemed her brother didn't want to risk her getting hurt.

Birchsplash was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking everything over, and he looked at both his littermates, seeming to have a completely silent conversation with their eyes, tails, ears, and whiskers. After a few moments, they looked back at the strange tom. "How many cats do you have in your group?"

"Including my mate and I, we have six, though our kits make it nine. My name is Rohan, yours?" The tom's eyes turned hopeful and friendly. Despite his Clanmates' relaxing shoulders, Rowanpaw still didn't like the tom, untrusting him for a reason he didn't exactly know.

"I'm Birchsplash," the young warrior finally replied. "These are my sisters, Hazelfur and Emberheart, and Rowanpaw." He nodded to each of them in turn, but the tom didn't seem to be listening anymore.

"Birchsplash?" he asked quietly. "Not from the Clans in the forest?"

Rowanpaw's fur began to stand, though the others looked at each other curiously. "How do you know the Clans?" Emberheart meowed, looking back at him.

The tom's eyes brightened excitedly. "I think I know someone you'll want to meet. Please, come!" He turned around and headed for a small hole in the wall of the Twoleg nest, disappearing with a flick of his tail.

"Should we really go?" Hazelfur asked, seemingly suspicious, and Rowanpaw knew he liked her a little more. He knew there was something off about this tom, especially now that a loner seemingly knew about the Clan cats.

"We need water," Emberheart replied, then started following after the tom with a small limp. Holding in a growl, Rowanpaw watched as Birchsplash hurried forward to walk in front of his sister, while Hazelfur stepped to her side. Lips curling, the apprentice grabbed the mouse and stalked after them.

"So, how do you know about us?" Birchsplash asked when they left the den and followed the tom away from the Thunderpath they had been following, and Hazelfur seemed a little distressed about it, just like Rowanpaw did. They had been sticking to it for a reason, and now they were just following the tabby because he knew some things he shouldn't? It made no sense!

"You'll see!" Rohan replied happily. "I don't want to get anything wrong, so she can explain it. The camp is pretty far; it's part of the Twolegplace where the fire didn't reach but was close enough the Twolegs didn't want to live there anymore."

"You use the word Twoleg?" Emberheart asked, ears perking. Usually, only Clan cats did, but since this tom seemed to know so much about them, why wouldn't he? Rowanpaw felt another flash of anger at the stranger.

"Mmhm!" he replied but didn't say anything else. Rowanpaw was angry his Clanmates went quiet and wanted to interrogate the tom, but with the mouse clamped in his jaws, he didn't want to try to speak. And, his throat was burning from thirst, so he couldn't help but long for the water the tom promised.

By the time sunhigh came, the Clan cats were *still* following Rohan

through the Twolegplace, traveling along different Thunderpaths in between destroyed Twoleg dens, with the strange tom sure-footed the entire time. He wouldn't even second guess himself, but pad with a high head and confident paws on twists and turns, commenting once and awhile of catches he had made in some dens, or where he met some of his group like a tom named Sam who had been killed by a fox defending the camp.

"Oh, I met Hickory right over there!" The tom flicked his tail to a Twoleg den that still stood, and Rowanpaw noticed the area around them was getting better, with less soot on the ground and in the air, showing the fire had been slowed in this area. "He's a great tom, been with me since Jenna was alive. I was really young when she disappeared, but we found her a few days later deep in the Twolegplace. She had been hunting but couldn't find any water and her thirst got too bad. She was barely living when we found her, and we didn't have time to get her back to camp."

"How many cats have you lost to thirst?" Emberheart asked while Hazelfur looked a little scared, the mouse now in her jaws, allowing Rowanpaw to breath better and ask questions if he decided he wanted to, but the loner seemed to need no pressuring to share stories.

"Many." The tom's happy-go-lucky attitude broke for a moment but then brightened barely a heartbeat later. "We've lost Hoot, Apple, Freckle, Elm, Ant, Rye, Sky, Trout, Yew..." He took a deep breath, "but we still remember them, and it helps us survive. Every cat that we have lost; we learn from the steps that made that happen, and try to go a different way. We don't let cats go out alone anymore, they always have a partner."

"Then why were *you* alone?" Rowanpaw growled, and the tom looked back at him, looking a little surprised by his tone, but then he looked forward again and led them around a corner, with the Twoleg dens getting stronger and nicer. Rowanpaw felt Birchsplash give him a sharp nudge, though the black-patched white tom didn't say anything.

"Hickory and I had gone out together, but when he was in an old Twoleg den some wood fell and filled his mouth with soot. I sent

him home to get water, just a little bit before I met you all. He's probably just arrived."

The tom stopped suddenly, and Rowanpaw looked up from the ground to see them facing a Twoleg den, dulled by soot but with the grass around it beginning to grow back. They had reached where the fire had stopped, though right behind the den was a tall, solid wall going as far as he could see. What it blocked, he had no idea, though he knew it must be impossible to get over there if the cats didn't use that place to hunt, since treetops were just visible over the wall's edge. Rowanpaw longed to hunt underneath the cover of a thick canopy of leaves.

"We're here!" he meowed excitedly and bounced forward. "Come on!" He went to part of the wall that was brightly colores and approached a small strange flap. "This is a cat-flap; the Twolegs use the door but have this so cats can go through," he told them, seeming proud, then disappeared inside.

"I don't want to go in there," Emberheart murmured stiffly, her fur bristling. "I didn't even like the destroyed ones."

Just then, Rohan's face appeared through the flap. "Come on!"

After looking at her littermates, Emberheart forced herself forward towards the den, her tail flicking. They all approached with bristling fur, and Birchsplash decided to disappear inside first, followed by Hazelfur then Emberheart, but Rowanpaw hesitated for a few heartbeats before slipping in after his mentor. The place looked just like the first Twoleg den they had slept in, dark and large with echoing shadows.

"Where are your cats?" Birchsplash asked quietly, casting his gaze around.

"Oh, we don't sleep in here unless it's cold or raining! We live in the garden—it's protected by a wall so we can only leave through this entrance." He padded over to an open area in the wall, but Rowanpaw realized when he approached that it was just clear. He could see his reflection, his skinny solid brown face with bright, untrusting amber eyes. He hated seeing his face and narrowed his

eyes to his paws.

It seemed only half the opening was a clear surface, for Rohan stepped through the other half. "I'm back!" he called.

There was an exciting mewling, and a moment later three small kits appeared on stumbling paws. They must've been barely two moons old, with short stubby legs and small round eyes. "You're back!" A small gray she-kit with pale yellow eyes stretched up on her back paws and pattered at Rohan's legs.

"You're getting so strong, my little kit!" Rohan lowered his muzzle and nudged her away playfully. "Only a few more moons before I'll bring you hunting with me!"

"Me too?" A solid brown she-kit with bright amber eyes bounced forward, looking hopeful.

"Yes, you too, and you, Meadow!" the tom added to the third she-kit, a gray tabby.

"Who are *they*?" The solid brown she-kit bounced fearlessly over to the Clan cats, and something in her eyes made Rowanpaw uneasy; he felt like he almost knew her.

"They're visitors from the Clans," Rohan replied, coming over and touching his kit's head. "Why don't you run ahead and tell your mother? I'm sure she'll love to hear where they're from." His tone turning quieter, he added, "tell her it's Birchsplash."

Rowanpaw, Hazelfur, and Emberheart looked at the black and white tom, but he seemed just as scared and shocked as they were. Mewling in excitement, the three kits stumbled off.

"Rohan's back with Birchsplash from the Clans!" one called.

Rohan flicked his tail to tell them to follow, then they all entered the garden. The grass was soft and warm, and the garden was covered with bushes and small trees. Rowanpaw looked up to see a she-cat walking forward on unsteady paws. She had short gray fur with a round face and large amber eyes, and something about her made Rowanpaw feel strange. She almost seemed familiar, like the

little kit, though this time Rowanpaw understood the feeling he had for the she-cat—hate. Really, really strong hate.

"Great StarClan..." Birchsplash murmured, taking a stumbling step forward, while the mouse dropped from Hazelfur's jaws and Emberheart sucked in a breath.

"Birchsplash?" the she-cat murmured, and something about her voice made him flinch. Had he... Had he met this cat before?

Suddenly, Birchsplash spoke. In a soft, quiet voice, he whispered, "Aspenheart? Is that really you?"

This chapter kinda feels like mouse-dung to me, but I've had a rough week. I'm excited about Rowanpaw's future, and I feel it's either cliche and/or predictable what I did at the end, but I'm still happy about it. If you can't remember, Aspenheart is Rowanpaw's mother. Hope you enjoy the continued story!

Question #1: Do you think Aspenheart appearing is cliche?

Question #2: What are your thoughts on Rohan?

Chapter Fifteen

Rowanpaw was frozen in shock and fury. Aspenheart, the she-cat that abandoned her kits, her Clan, her friends, was right here in front of him, acting like she had done nothing wrong. His claws dug into the ground, his muscles tightening. All he wanted to do was leap at her, but then a pelt brushed against his side. He recognized the feel and scent of Hazelfur but didn't turn to look at her.

The warrior's breath ruffled his ear as she murmured, "I hate her, too, but they have water and a chance to get more prey. Save your anger and let us get stronger first. For Emberheart," she added when he looked ready to argue. He forced a nod and shook his fur lightly, trying to get it to stop bristling, but he couldn't make himself sheathe his claws.

He cast his gaze around, surveying the area, and he immediately noticed eyes shining from the bushes. One cat emerged, a dark ginger tabby tom with guarded amber eyes, but he said nothing and stayed crouched by a pool of sparkling water.

"Birchsplash..." Aspenheart said again, taking a small step towards her old apprentice. Rowanpaw was angered when the young white and black didn't step away but instead moved closer. "You're truly alive...?"

"Of course I am," he responded. "So are Emberheart and Hazelfur." He looked back at his sisters, and Rowanpaw was little happier when neither made a move to go forward. Fury flared in his stomach when Birchsplash touched noses with his old mentor. "I didn't think you would've made it this long, and with more kits." He nodded to the small she-kits watching them with wide eyes from behind Rohan's legs, partly hidden by some ferns.

"They're a blessing..." she replied, looking over at them with eyes soft and loving. Rowanpaw snorted.

Good thing they're all she-cats--if there was a tom, she would've

abandoned him by now. Who knows, maybe she did have a tomkit, but had neglected him. He wouldn't be surprised. His tail tip flicked, his neck fur rising slightly, though he forced it back down for Emberheart.

"Birchsplash..." Aspenheart looked at the tom with a scared gaze. "Blazekit and Ratkit... what happened to them?"

He gave a soft purr. "They're both great apprentices." Rowanpaw waited for the black-blotched tom to look at him and announce he was Ratpaw, but he didn't even look in his direction. "What about Lavenderkit?"

Aspenheart sighed and looked at her paws. "She died of thirst. It wasn't long after I left, just a few days. I carried her for what seemed like forever until we got here." She looked over near the water, where Rowanpaw noticed some soil with grass beginning to grow on it. Was his sister really buried right there?

"How did you know to come here?" Birchsplash inquired, then he suddenly broke out into a hoarse cough.

Rowanpaw's head turned to a silver tabby she-cat appearing from the shadows. She had white on her belly, chest, muzzle, and paws, though it was stained a pale gray from the soot in the air. "Let them drink, first." Her blue eyes were kind and she nodded to the back of the garden where the water was. Another cat had appeared, a ginger she-cat with paler belly, chest, and paws. Her yellow eyes glowed with curiosity.

Emberheart let out a grateful sigh, then headed forward, leaning her head down to take a drink. "Wait." Hazelfur hurried forward and stood next to her sister, then she lowered her muzzle to the water and took a few laps. She licked her muzzle, then looked at her sister and nodded. "It's fine."

"Thanks," Emberheart sounded a little sarcastic, then she began to drink. Birchsplash came up next to her to take his share, and Rowanpaw wanted to follow, his throat screaming with pain. He was longing the taste of cool water running down his throat, but Aspenheart had turned to look at him.

"Are you going to drink, too?" she mewed politely.

He held in a growl, then stalked forward and slipped against Emberheart's side. "She's acting so innocent..." he hissed under his breath, moving forward and taking a lick of water. He groaned as it washed over his parched tongue, feeling amazing, though it hurt when it hit his empty stomach.

"I know," Emberheart murmured back, "but you need to hold it in. These cats can give us information. Drink slowly-it will hurt your stomach if you have too much."

He nodded, too upset to speak, then he drew back. Emberheart followed him away from the water, and they sat together. Hazelfur came over, then Birchsplash, and they all looked at Aspenheart. Hazelfur looked suspicious, Emberheart was unreadable, Birchsplash was happy and also curious, while Rowanpaw was flaming with fury, but he was good at hiding it. He had been for many moons.

"So, how *did* you know how to come here?" Hazelfur meowed, wrapping her tail around her paws.

"Oh, well..." Aspenheart padded over with Rohan at her side, though their kits were herded away by the silver tabby she-cat. "I knew Rohan for many moons, and I thought we would be safe here if we managed to make it."

Birchsplash looked at the tom, then back at the gray she-cat, staring into her round amber eyes. "He's the father of your first litter, too, isn't he? Blazepaw and Ratpaw; they're his kits?"

Rowanpaw felt the muscles in his body stiffen, his eyes wide with shock at Birchsplash's accusation.

"Yes, he is." Aspenheart didn't even flinch.

The mange-ridden, fox-hearted dung-eater! He stood up with a stiff back, turned around, and stalked away, every bone in his body telling him to attack her.

"Is he okay?" He heard Aspenheart ask.

He growled softly, cutting out her voice, and went into the Twoleg den. He thought about hiding in the shadows of the large area, finding someplace no one would find him, but it was too stuffy to breathe. His claws scraped against the ground, getting caught in the stiff, fluffy flooring. Growling, he tugged his paws up and quickly left through the cat-flap, tail lashing. His mind whirled with the new information.

How could he just randomly happen upon a random cat in a random Twoleg den, who just happened to be his *father?* And to see his mother... His claws dug into the hard soil. No wonder he had felt weird about the little brown she-kit--her coat matched his almost down to the last hair, and her eyes had the same gleam in the bright amber depts.

Growling, he slashed his claws over the ground, creating deep gashes in the soil. He longed to sink his teeth into some type of creature, to dig his claws into their skin. His tail lashed, and he began to stalk away. A voice came behind him.

"Can I join you?"

He flinched at his mentor's voice. "Yeah," he murmured, not looking at her. He gazed at his paws as he padded away. Emberheart's fur brushed against his side.

"That was the best water I've ever had, wouldn't you agree?" Her mew was soft and caring.

"I guess..." His anger was too strong to talk about how amazing the water was in his throat. He had never had water clean enough he could see the bottom and didn't taste like dirt.

Emberheart sighed. "Look, I know it's a shock to see your mother, and to see your father..." her mew trailed off in disbelief. "I never thought I would see either of them in the rest of my life."

He stayed quiet for a moment as they traveled alongside the large wall at the back of the Twolegplace, watching his mud-stained paws step on the hard grass. "I always tried to tell myself my father was a good warrior; that he gave up his life helping the Clan," he

murmured truthfully. "I hoped he had loved me and would've been there for me, but no... He's just a rogue that didn't care that I was alive..."

He slowed to a stop, his throat tight, and he felt Emberheart's tail on his back. "I'm sorry, Rowanpaw. You deserve so much better than them. One day you'll have kits of your own, and you can show them how to raise kits. I know you'll turn out great, Rowanpaw. And you need to believe it yourself."

He slowly forced his gaze over to her's, eyes sad. He swallowed, blinking softly, and then he pressed his side against her's, tucking his head under her muzzle. "Thank you, Emberheart, for being there for me..."

Her tongue rasped awkwardly over his forehead. "Of course, Rowanpaw."

He breathed in heavily then let it out, his mind wandering back to when he was a small kit, back to the day Emberheart had saved him. "Thank you, Emberheart, for when I was a kit," he murmured.

"Young one, you've thanked me enough." She stepped back from him, waiting until he looked her in the eye before saying, "you need to forgive yourself, Rowanpaw. It wasn't your fault."

He sighed, looking at his paws. "It was all my fault..."

When they returned to the garden, Rowanpaw was surprised to see the mouse was still lying in the grass, with Aspenheart's three kits looking hungrily at it. "Why can't we have it, Rohan, we're starving!" the one called Meadow mewled.

Didn't he take the prey for his kits and mate? Rowanpaw thought, then stiffened as Aspenheart padded up, but she barely even gave him a glance.

"Birchsplash told me you're expecting kits," she meowed, "please, you need the mouse more than us. Rain and Copper just went out hunting."

Emberheart was already shaking her head. "No, I don't need it."

Aspenheart flicked her tail. "Emberheart, eat it. You're much too skinny to be carrying kits."

Why does she have to be right? Rowanpaw hated the fact that he was agreeing with the Clan's traitor, but he forced himself past it and meowed, "Emberheart, no one else will eat until you do. Do it for me?" he added when she still looked hesitant.

She sighed. "Fine." She padded over and devoured the mouse in a few quick bites, then she cleaned her muzzle of blood. "Thank you," she added to Aspenheart, who watched her with excited eyes.

"Of course! I'm happy I can help with your kits. I've been trying to be a better queen; I didn't do too good on my first time..." She scratched her claws in the soil.

"I'd say," Rowanpaw hissed under his breath.

"What?" Aspenheart looked at him.

"Nothing that concerns you," he hissed back.

"Oh." She swallowed, her ears flicking, then she shook out her fur. "So, your name is Rowanpaw? You must've been born right after I left." He was ready to lash out at her. How did she not even recognize her own kit? "Are you Ashbreeze's and Brackenfoot's kit, perhaps?" she asked.

"I don't have parents!" he hissed, fur bristling, and the she-cat took a quick step back.

"Sorry!" Her eyes were scared, clearly disrupted by his anger, and she slowly slunk away.

"Play nice." Emberheart had come back up to him. "I know you don't want her to know who you are; so stay calm and just act like she isn't there. Okay?" Her shoulder nudged his.

"Okay," he agreed, blinking his eyes. He was suddenly filled with fatigue, and he couldn't help but yawn.

Emberheart purred. "I'm tired, too. Why don't we rest?" She led him

over to a low bush and burrowed inside, letting him curl up by her stomach. He felt calmed by her warm belly on his back, and he tucked himself as close as he could. He felt something moving softly and shifted, leaving Emberheart's warmth, and the movement stop. He leaned back, curling into her stomach, but the moving started again.

"What is that?" he meowed, yawning tiredly.

"My kits, I think," she replied. He stiffened, then twisted around so he was facing her, lying on his back. He stared at her tired yellow gaze, feeling hope rise in his chest. She blinked, soft happiness shining in her eyes. "They make me feel safe... Like I'll never be alone..." She turned her head down to her chest and looked at her swelling stomach.

"Do you have ideas of what to name them?" he asked.

"Oh, I won't know until I see them," she responded, though she did add, "but I guess I've thought of a few. If I have a she-kit, I want to name her Hopekit, to give hope to the Clan of a good future. Dovekit is another name I thought of if she looks like Heronclaw. I also thought Ryekit for a tom, or maybe Lionkit or Larchkit." She sounded so happy talking about names for her kits.

"I like Hopekit," he meowed, tucking himself close. "And Ryekit. Have you talked to Heronclaw about names?" he added.

She shook her head. "Heronclaw doesn't know about the kits yet. If he did, he would've never let me come." She let out a soft purr. "I'm so scared to have these kits, Rowanpaw, but I'm so happy at the same time..." She let her head rest on the ground, and he curled himself closely into her side.

"I'll keep them safe," he promised quietly. "Just like you did for Blazepaw..." He yawned, his eyes closing, and he drifted into a peaceful sleep.

In his dreams, Rowanpaw was brought back to when he was three moons old.

Young Ratkit was waiting at the entrance of the nursery, his tail flicking excitedly. Next to him, Blazekit was wiggling, looking back inside at the sleeping form of Bloomcloud. "She's still asleep; is the camp clear?" He moved back to press against his brother's side.

"I don't know yet! I'm waiting for Sparkkit to send the signal!" he responded, staring out of the den with an anxious gaze, the bushes around him scratching his fur when he shifted. Then, he saw eyes shine from near the camp entrance, hidden in the dry ferns near the rocky path. "Alright, come on!" They quickly raced across the clearing on soft paws, diving into the bush next to Sparkkit.

The brown she-kit looked at them and murmured softly, "is Carpkit coming?" She looked past the two brothers in search of her littermate.

Ratkit shook his head. "No, he wanted to stay. Lakeshine told him it was likely a storm would hit tonight, so he got too scared to come with."

"Is there going to be a storm?" Blazekit asked, casting his gaze up to the sky, just visible through the pine trees. It seemed clouded, but it was too dark to tell.

"You can stay if you want, scaredy mouse!" Ratkit taunted, then began the climb up the rock path. He made it to the top after a few leaps and waited for his littermate and friend. "Who was guarding?"

"Juniperfur," Sparkkit replied. "She went to get her replacement--so we better hurry and get out of here!" Without another word, the older she-kit bunched her muscles and leaped down the fox-length to the ground. Ratkit flinched when he heard a wet, squishing sound as her legs disappeared into the territory floor. She gave a surprised squeak.

"Wait for me!" Blazekit mewled, leaning halfway off the ledge before unsteadily falling to the ground. His legs collapsed under him and he fell into the murky marsh. "Oh, gross!"

Ratkit laughed quietly at him, then, after looking back at the camp to make sure they weren't spotted, he leaped down. His paws disappeared into the marshy ground as his brother's had, and he snarled in complaint. Sparkkit nudged his shoulder.

"You're going to have to get used to it sometime, Ratkit!" she purred then padded away, raising her paws high over the ground to take big steps. He watched her for a moment, then helped Blazekit steady himself. After his brother nodded his thanks, they headed off.

"I should get to lead; I was the one who thought of sneaking out!" Ratkit struggled forward and playfully shoved Sparkkit away. She almost tripped but managed to steady herself.

"You dirty mouse! I'll get you!" She forced herself into a leap, but he managed to scramble out of the way so she landed muzzle-first in the mud. "Unfair!" she mewled, sitting down and cleaning her muzzle. She winced as she licked the mud from her paw. Deciding to be nice to her, Ratkit walked over and helped her clean her pad until she could clear off her muzzle. She gave him a friendly glance with her yellow eyes. "Thanks."

"Hey, lovebirds, wanna try to catch some prey?" They looked over at Blazekit and saw his hungry gaze. Ratkit couldn't help but look at his brother's skinny side. Since they were kits, they were fed the best, but they were still skinny enough to see their ribs, though just barely.

"Warriors can barely catch prey, mouse-brain!" he meowed good-humoredly, forcing hunger from his mind, and they began to pad off. He didn't like the way the mud stuck to the hairs in between his toes, and how it clogged up his claws. He shivered in disgust when his leg fell into a dirty puddle, though he continued on.

His legs started to burn pretty soon, and he noticed that Sparkkit and Blazekit were getting tired, too. But he was so happy to be out of their cramped camp he didn't even care about the stiff, sappy smell in the air. They walked and walked until the trees stopped and in front of them lay a land of tumbling hills; SageClan's moor territory. Separating them from the bright, lush grass was a large black path.

"That must be the Old Thunderpath!" Sparkkit exclaimed, moving forward and pressing her paw against it. "Wow, it feels so weird!"

Ratkit went up to her and put down his own paw. It was rough and had a strange feeling to it, and there was a sharp scent coming from it, though he didn't know what. He remembered smelling it off warriors

before after they returned from border patrols. He also remembered another smell on the ginger warrior Emberheart; an amazing smell that wasn't sap or soil. It had been sweet and strong. She had said the breeze blew EchoClan scent into their territory.

"Let's head this way," he decided, padding on the side of the Old Thunderpath in the direction he knew EchoClan territory to be. His friends followed him without complaint, chatting about how much they wanted something to eat. He tried to ignore his grumbling stomach but to no avail.

His legs were burning and his paws were mucky from the dank pine forest ground, and he decided to walk along the Old Thunderpath. It hurt his soft, delicate pads, but it allowed him to walk faster than before. "You couldn't get me *to walk on that!" Blazekit mewled indignantly, moving quickly to overtake his brother's speed.*

"Toms!" Sparkkit sighed, then gave an excited squeak. "Look, EchoClan territory!" She bounced forward past a clump of ferns, and the brothers quickly followed. They looked over the Old Thunderpath and saw the thick, dense forest that made EchoClan's territory. Ratkit remembered hearing the other side was a moorland.

His eyes turned wistful as he looked at the dense forest. The shadows were deep and he felt like they were almost calling his name, luring him closer to the oak trees. Sparkkit looked daringly over at the enemy Clan's territory and said, "I wonder how much prey they have."

"A lot," Blazekit replied, walking up next to them. "Lakeshine says we're the only Clan suffering from hunger. None of them even notice--or care."

The three were quiet for a moment, then Ratkit flicked his ear as something touched it. He looked up at the dark sky, and large raindrops began to land on his pelt, sinking through his fur and chilling his bones. Sparkkit squealed and dove under a bush. "I don't like rain!" she mewled.

"We should go back to camp," Blazekit added, fluffing out his fur.

"Uh, yeah!" Sparkkit replied sarcastically, then suddenly shot off and hid at the roots of a pine tree. Ratkit and his brother quickly followed, but

they had only just begun moving when they stopped and looked at each other.

"Does... Anyone remember the way home?" Ratkit asked, searching the dark pines anxiously. They had left the Old Thunderpath behind them, but that didn't even really matter--he couldn't remember how long they had walked along its edge.

"I think it's this way." Sparkkit headed slightly to the left at a quick trot, her legs getting stuck in the marshy ground. They hurried along with their heads down, but the rain continued to get heavier and heavier until they could barely walk through the flooding ground. Their legs disappeared almost completely into the dank muck.

Sparkkit, being the oldest, led them, turning around to find a better way through the darkness once and a while, but they were sure they were going the right way. That's why they all stopped in shock when they found themselves back at the Old Thunderpath.

"You led us the wrong way!" Ratkit growled, and his fur would've bristled if it hadn't been weighed down by the water. "We should've just gone straight!"

"Don't blame me!" Sparkkit snapped back, "this was your idea!"

"We should've stayed on the Thunderpath, not walk right into a place we don't know!" His claws dug into the wet ground, squishing awkwardly and making him shiver. His body was already numb, frozen to the bone, and all he wanted was to be back in his nest, curled up with his brother.

"Please don't fight!" Blazekit pleaded, and Ratkit looked at his brother, shocked to see him looking tiny like he was barely a moon old. His fur was soaked and his ears were flat, while his eyes were large with fear and tiredness. Ratkit looked over at Sparkkit, and they both silently agreed to be quiet about their previous thoughts to help Blazekit calm down. Ratkit pressed against's his brother's side in an attempt to warm him.

"I can try to climb a tree and see if I can see the camp," Sparkkit meowed, and before either tom could tell her what a dumb idea it was, she was digging her claws into a pine tree and beginning to climb up. Her

legs were shaking and she let out mewls of pain, but she continued to climb, desperately trying to get to the lowest branch.

"Just come down!" Ratkit yowled up to her, trying to get his meow louder than the rushing air and thundering rain. But either she didn't hear him, or she didn't care. "Sparkkit, please!" Still, she ignored him, continuing to climb. The rain pelted his eyes and made it hard to see his friend, but he kept his narrowed gaze on her swinging tail.

It happened so fast he barely even realized it happened.

Sparkkit's back leg slipped from the wood, and for a moment she hung from three legs, then her other back leg fell. She barely held on for another heartbeat before she plummeted towards the ground with a screeching yowl.

"Sparkkit!" He leaped forward, hoping to catch her before she landed on the mushy ground around the tree's roots, but he was too slow and she hit the tree's roots with a loud thump! *and a yowl of pain. "Sparkkit!" he cried again, jumping to her side, terror racing through his frozen bones. She lay still, her body twisted on and muddy.*

Then, her eyes blinked open. "It... It hurts," she whispered, struggling to breathe, her face beginning to sink into a puddle of thick water.

Ratkit looked at her with a desperate gaze, eyes terrified. In the darkness, he couldn't see a thing, but he could feel Blazekit pressed against his side. "I... I don't know what to do." He turned to his brother, who was looking just as terrified. "Blazekit, what do I do?"

His brother's mouth opened, but only a choking sound came out as his jaw trembled. Ratkit looked down at his injured friend. Why did he have to bring them out here? Why did StarClan send this storm on the night they snuck out, and not just maybe another day--where they would safely tuck themselves inside the nursery's thin walls? Where Ratkit and Blazekit could slip inside Bloomcloud's nest and cuddle close with the three older kits?

"Wh-what hurts?" he finally stammered, going to his friend and pushing his paw under her head, helping it out of the water. She was too weak to help, and claws clenched his heart when he noticed a thin trickle of

blood coming from the she-kit's mouth.

"My stomach... and my leg..." she responded. "Bu-but the cold is nu-numbing it." She gave a dry swallow, eyes glazed with pain.

Ratkit nodded, his ears flat against his head. "Blazekit, will you hold her head out of the water?" He waited until his brother had placed his mud-stained paw under Sparkkit's head, then he moved to her side and looked around her body, eyes slitted against the darkness, and he leaned close and used his nose to guide him while struggling to see.

He nudged softly at her belly and flinched when she mewled in pain. He tried to look and feel with his paw, but there wasn't any cut or warm blood. It was on the inside. He gave her side a soft lick, ignoring the dank taste of mud, and searched her legs. When he moved down to her stretched out back legs, he immediately noticed that one of them was twisted around, no blood coming but clearly incredibly painful.

StarClan if you still care for us, please save her! he pleaded to the dark sky. Nothing. His ancestors didn't care. Anger flared through him, then faded when Sparkkit let out cries of agony.

"Please make it stop," she murmured weakly, "please just make it stop..."

He quickly moved to her head, giving her forehead a soft lick. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, then looked up, searching for somewhere, anywhere, to go. But it was still dark and his coat was soaked to the bone. "We just need to keep moving and hope it's towards camp..." He looked down at Sparkkit. "Do you think... Can you walk? We'll help you," he added quickly.

Sparkkit let out a groan but then gave a weak nod. He nodded to Blazekit, who was still holding up her head, then he went to her back and--despite his disgust--pressed his body to the ground and struggled to get behind her, nosing her back to help her stand. She yowled and whimpered in pain, but he forced himself to continue, knowing he just needed to get her back to camp, back to Sandflight.

She was struggling to breathe, but yet she still helped them, though it was slow and clearly painful. Blazekit stood on her other side and when she finally managed to stand, he let her fall onto his side. She was a little

bigger than him, so he struggled to hold her up. Ratkit took the other half of her weight, and together the two brothers turned her around--they were pretty sure they were facing the Old Thunderpath--and started slowly on their way.

Ratkit was tired, starving, thirsty, and completely frozen, but despite all this he yowled out into the storm, pleading for help. He was angry with his ancestors for ignoring his plea for help, but he still begged them to let one of his Clanmates hear his cries and come to help. Perhaps Bloomcloud had awoken to find them gone, and patrols were sent out to find them. He pleaded for it to be true.

Soon, though, he couldn't yowl anymore, and as his head dropped, his throat burning, Blazekit started calling for help, waiting a few moments in between each call, saving his voice, and Ratkit wished he had thought of doing that; it would've allowed him to call for a longer amount of time. They continued on, but soon Blazekit gave up his yowling, both of them growing too tired while supporting Sparkkit's larger frame.

"Ratkit, look!" Blazekit rasped tiredly. He raised his gaze hopefully and saw a large fallen tree, the roots risen from the ground, with the soil hardened and making a small shelter. The littermates helped their friend over, and he was filled with relief when he saw the tree was partly hollowed near the roots, giving them a small dry place to wait out of the storm--if Sparkkit lasted that long.

They struggled into the log and settled Sparkkit at the back, then they all huddled together, ignoring their soaked fur and trying to get body heat. With Sparkkit against the back, it allowed her to stay in the safest part, her legs splayed out and her belly heaving with each breath. Blazekit had curled himself around her so he helped her get warm but didn't press on her injured leg or stomach.

Ratkit crouched close while trying to block the harsh winds from his weak friend and terrified littermate. His body was numb and his vision was beginning to blur, but he ignored it; he just had to keep them safe until they were rescued. He wasn't sure, but he might've slipped in and out of consciousness, for no time seemed to past but the storm seemed to go for moons. He watched Sparkkit's feeble breathing with scared eyes, and his breath caught in his throat when her stomach slowed its movement.

Stumbling closer, he brought his face right next to her muzzle, and she looked at him with weak, dull eyes. "You know... I always thought the name Rowankit would suit you better," she mewed in a weak voice, then the light in her eyes died, and her stomach fell still. Ratkit tried to feel for her breath, but nothing stirred his whiskers no matter how close he moved to her muzzle.

"Is she... dead?" Blazekit murmured scaredly.

Unable to speak, Ratkit nodded. Blazekit's eyes flared with agony, and Ratkit pressed against him, still shielding Sparkkit's body from the storm. He was still freezing and couldn't see a thing, but he was happy for it; now, he couldn't feel Sparkkit's body turning cold, or the deathly scent that rose from dead cats. He had watched a warrior and elder die from hunger, and the scent had stayed in the clearing for days because Sandflight didn't have the herbs to cover it.

He didn't know how long he lay there, his mind fuzzing and his eyelids drooping, but he continued to wake Blazekit and himself. He didn't know what would happen if they slept, but he didn't want to risk it. He tried to shake Blazekit again, but his brother murmured weakly and didn't get up, just slightly shifted. He nudged him with a sharp paw, but his brother barely reacted.

"Blazekit!" he rasped, jutting a paw into the tom's side. His brown eyes struggled open. "Blazekit, stay awake!" he gasped. Blazekit stared at him weakly, eyes glazed with confusion, and his eyes began to close again.

Then, a faint call rose above the rushing storm.

"Ratkit! Blazekit! Sparkkit! Can you hear me?"

Weak relief flooded through his small body. He struggled to the tree's roots and forced the loudest yowl he could. "Over here! Please help!"

For a moment, there was silence... Then the voice returned. "Keep yowling! We're coming but we can't see you!"

He let out another yowl, coughing afterward, but he continued again. Through the haze of rain and shadows, shapes appeared. Their eyes glowed, and a moment later four warriors were standing in front of him.

He collapsed to the log's bottom, gasping in relief. They had come for them! They hadn't been abandoned to die.

"Ratkit, are the others with you?" The main warrior, who he couldn't name in his current state, leaned close, and their warm breath on his neck made him whimper when it disappeared.

"Sparkkit... She's... It's my fault!" He struggled to breathe, and he looked tiredly at the warriors. He expected them to get mad, but they didn't. Another cat stepped forward and took him by his scruff. He knew he was too big to carry normally, and he could feel the warrior struggling, but he was too tired to even try to open his jaws.

This close to the warrior, he could faintly take in their scent, and he recognized it as Emberheart. He watched weakly as Blazekit was brought out in the main warrior's jaws, and his brother was passed off to another warrior. Ratkit couldn't tell if his brother was breathing or not. Did he kill his brother as well as his best friend?

The main warrior had disappeared into the log again, then emerged. They looked at the other three warriors and shook her head. The last one without a kit moved forward and helped her with the limp shape of Sparkkit. They settled her on the main cat's shoulders, and Ratkit mewled as they started off. His tail was dragging in the muck and his back paws brushed over the ground once and a while.

The next thing he knew, Ratkit was waking in the medicine cat's den, eyes glazed. His body was numb, but he knew it wasn't cold. There was a warm body against his back. He weakly opened his eyes and turned his head to see Blazekit next to him, his brother's side moving up and down steadily. He was alive!

"You're awake."

He swung his head around, groaning at the pain that flared through him, and found himself staring at Sandflight, the medicine cat. "Where's... Sparkkit...?" He let out a slow breath.

"You shouldn't worry about that right now," Sandflight replied, coming over and touching his paw with her nose. "You're lucky that your fever has gone down. What were you thinking, leaving camp during a storm?"

He was ready to tiredly snap an answer, but another voice interrupted them. "Sandflight, go easy on them." He looked to see a skinny light ginger she-cat with kind yellow eyes. "Lakeshine wants to talk to you." He recognized her voice faintly, and he remembered her; it was Emberheart, the one who had carried him home.

"You're barely a warrior, Emberheart, don't go lecturing me!" There was a hint of amusement in Sandflight's mew, and she left the den without further complaint.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Emberheart meowed once the medicine cat had left, her mew full of sympathy.

"So she's really dead?" he murmured. He had hoped it had just been a dream... He had brought them out to the forest to have fun, to see the other Clans' territories, but he had ended up getting his best friend killed... How much did she suffer before she died? Regret punctured his heart.

"Yes, she is," Emberheart sounded sad. "I heard you calling through the storm; any longer and your brother would've died. You kept saying it was your fault, why would you think that?"

"Because it was my idea to leave camp," he responded. "Sparkkit and Blazekit came along because I begged them... And now my best friend is dead. My brother almost joined her..." Feeling awful, he tucked his muzzle under his mud-stained paws.

Emberheart's tongue rasped over his head. "I'm sorry you think that way. I'm here for you, Ratkit. If you ever need to talk to me about anything, I'll be here. Alright?" Her mew was soft and trusting.

Unable to speak, the small kit just nodded and closed his eyes to block out the outside world, hoping once again this was all just an awful dream.

Question #1: What do you think of the story so far?

Question #2: What do you think the future will hold for Rowanpaw and his family?

Chapter Sixteen

"I promise we'll never forget you; if Sage agrees, I want to name one of our kits after you... Would you be okay with that? My brother... Do you want your kits to know who you are?" Ravenpaw watched Bat as he stood on a tall hill in the open moorland, his eyes facing up to the Star Streak.

As the dream began to fade, Ravenpaw looked over the four cats at Bat's side, wondering if they were his kits, but none looked like Echo. He called out the she-cat's name after the five long-dead cats disappeared, and she shimmered into view, right next to where her father had been standing. "Who were the cats that were with him?" he asked, moving forward to stand next to her.

"They were his guess of what we, his kits, would look like," Echo replied calmly. "I'm guessing you're wondering about Bat's brother?" she added.

He nodded. "What's his name? And who are his kits?"

Echo sighed, blinking her eyes softly at the star-littered sky. "His name is Crow, he died twelve moons before I was born. He was Flint and Smoke's father. Creek told them they never had one because she was very troubled after his death, and by the time she was over it, they were so old she was scared they'd hate her."

"So they don't know they're related to Bat?" Ravenpaw asked, wondering what it would be like if he didn't have a father, and a pang hit his heart as he thought about not knowing Boulderclaw.

"They think that Bat might be their father, but something happened between Creek and him," Echo replied with a light purr. "Bat has always wanted them to know, so he can tell them stories of Crow, but he doesn't want to upset Creek. They were very close, and it's still a very sensitive subject. And now that Flint and Smoke are older..."

"She's scared they'll hate her for hiding the truth," Ravenpaw finished, and Echo nodded. "Do they ever find out?"

She turned to look at him, blinking with amusement shining in her eyes. "You'll have to wait and see, young one."

"Alright." His tail flicked, but he felt light-hearted. "Hey, Echo, did Smoke and Flint have any other littermates?"

"Yes, they had a sister," she meowed. "Her name was Dust."

"How did she die?" Ravenpaw prompted when Echo fell silent, wanting to know so nothing happened to his own Clanmates—if he could stop it, that is.

"She was eating mouse for the first time and choked on a bone." Echo looked at her misty white paws. "She would've made a fine warrior."

"Ravenpaw! Time to get up!" His dream was broken by Mossrain's mew in his ear. "We're all out of watermint, and I want to collect some in case someone gets a bellyache. On our way back we'll stop to get some borage leaves, too. We only have a few dead ones left, and they won't be any help. We'll come back and rest, then we'll go through one of the tunnels for training and so we can pick up some dock that grows near the entrance in the forest. The tunnel is pretty dark and scary the first time going through, but you'll get used to it soon enough! We might also get some ragwort leaves, but I'm not sure yet. When we get back I'll have you check on Dappletail and see if she's sore. You can also clean her fur of ticks and fleas." He was speaking so fast it was hard to understand.

Ravenpaw yawned, his head fuzzy with everything his mentor was saying, and he was sure he had already forgotten half of it. "Isn't, uh..." He blinked his eyes to clear his mind. "Isn't Flamepaw supposed to be taking care of the elders' den, for his punishment?" He still recalled the fresh memory from three days before, when he learned his brother had left Willowpaw alone so he could see the dead Twoleg with the other apprentices.

He looked over at the nest that Willowpaw had vacated the day before, deciding to go back to the apprentices' den to sleep, though

she had asked to stop her training for a few sunrises until she started feeling better, and, of course, Pebblepeak had allowed it. The entire medicine cat's den was empty, with Grayblaze and Snowfern back to the warriors' den the same time as Willowpaw.

Grayblaze was off patrols until his paw healed in a little more than a quarter moon, while Snowfern had to wait for a few sunrises before she could start going on small, short patrols, but she wasn't allowed to hunt until the wounds on her back were better healed, for they were still large and fresh and began bleeding randomly, lowering their supply of herbs and causing Ravenpaw's heart to pound constantly in fear for his mother.

"Oh, that's right! Guess you don't have to then! Go out and get something to eat, I'll finish sorting the store!" Mossrain's voice broke his thoughts once again, and he stood tiredly from his nest and let out a yawn, stretching out his muscles, and they screamed in protest, still upset from his long walk to SageClan territory. Mossrain had told him his body would be sore, but he needed to keep moving if he wanted them to get better. It sounded mouse-brained, but he didn't argue with the older tom.

"Okay," he yawned again, slipping out of his nest and tottering across the den. When he entered the clearing, he instinctively closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the sun burn his eyelids. He squinted them open a small bit, softly getting used to the pale dawn light, and he sighed with relief when he was finally able to look around the clearing.

Fresh scents from the dawn patrol filled his nose, and he silently wondered why Mossrain liked to wake up so early. Shaking his head, he padded around the side of Acornstar's den's pool and approached the small fresh-kill pile on the other side between the water and the warriors' den. There were only a few pieces of prey, wet from the misty cold night, and he nosed past a large sparrow and grabbed a small mouse, its wet fur making his skin shiver.

He took it over back to the Rock Pile, settling down by the side of it, the stones much too cold this early to lay on. He hunkered down in the moist grass, letting it brush against his sides, and took a bite from the mouse. The meat was tough and dry, but he ate without

complaint and quickly finished it.

He cleaned muzzle then his paws and turned around to brush down his fur, tail flicking. He watched it in the corner of his vision, eyes narrowed on the flicking tip, and he suddenly jumped for it. Of course, when he turned, it whipped away from him, and he gave a quick turn in an attempt to grab it, but he missed easily.

He sighed, bored with nothing to do, and left the Rock Pile to slip into the medicine cat's den, and he immediately noticed Mossrain heading towards him. "Are you going to eat before we leave?" he asked.

"No, I'll eat later. I had a vole a little after moonhigh; Grayblaze came in complaining about a pain in his paw, and it turned out he was practicing battle moves when I wasn't looking! He should've hopefully stopped by now. I told a few warriors to make sure he rested. I let you sleep because you were still tired from the Moonstream. Oh, yes, I forgot! Have you had more visions? I saw you touch noses with Featherpaw the other day." The medicine cat slipped out of the den, his apprentice following.

Ravenpaw nodded as they headed for the camp entrance. "It was just her and Frostfall catching a rabbit on the moor, not too far in the future. Leaf-bare hadn't come yet, but the leaves were all yellow and orange; no green. And it was cold."

"That could be a sign of good hunting," Mossrain meowed happily. "Good! I'm glad your getting used to your ability."

I think it was just a sign of them hunting. He didn't think his visions showed all the important stuff, just sometimes. Like the one for Stormkit's kitting, Goldenpool's future injury, and Berrywhisker's death. The few others had just shown random things.

"Come on, the herbs won't wait!" Mossrain was bouncing for the moor camp entrance, disappearing down the rocky path, and Ravenpaw forced himself to move faster, yawning again. His pads were burning and his muscles ached, but he did his best to ignore it. Mossrain seemed to forget how young he was, but he liked that the young medicine cat didn't treat him like a kit.

Ravenpaw blinked still, trying to get his eyes calm, but they were dry and sleepy. He stumbled down the pathway, his toe hitting a sharp rock, and he stopped for a moment to lick at his paw. Mossrain waited for him to catch up, then they headed the rest of the way together. Mossrain's pawsteps were happy and bouncy as he jumped over a few littering rocks from running warriors leaping to and from camp.

"Alright, so, our best supply of watermint is down by the SageClan border—we share the herbs with Poppysong, actually. It's a big supply and it grows in the middle of the river where the ground is higher. They grow really well, and there's too much to keep to ourselves, even with the anger between our Clans." Mossrain was hopping excitedly over the soft moor grass.

"Anger? What anger?" Was EchoClan having troubles with SageClan? He hadn't heard anything about it.

"Oh, yeah, I guess I forgot you're still very young," Mossrain meowed. "Well, SageClan warriors chased a rabbit over the border—they used the path where the watermint is—and killed it about a moon ago. One of our patrols caught them and they had a fight about who's prey it was. We let them have it, but Grayblaze, who was leading the patrol, gave them some scratched ears they won't forget. Robinstar is upset about it, and he and Acornstar have been having a little disagreement about what happened. Robinstar claims since his warriors caught it, it was their prey, and it didn't matter if it was on our land because they had chased it from their's."

"Are we going to battle with them?" Ravenpaw asked scaredly, his tail tip flicking. He didn't want his Clan to be injured! He remembered how bad Grayblaze and Snowfern looked after their fight, and for that to happen to his whole Clan... What about his littermates? Would they be in the fight? Would they be injured, maybe killed...?

"I hope not. We medicine cats do everything we can to not have useless battles. And over some stupid rabbit! Great StarClan, warriors can be mouse-brains sometimes!" Mossrain's head bobbed side to side as he trotted with a bounce in his step. Ravenpaw pictured back to when they were heading to the Star Cave.

"On the half-moon, a patrol saw us, but they weren't angry at us. Why weren't they, if they're threatening battle?" he asked.

"Well, first things first, they aren't threatening a battle." Mossrain cast his gaze back to look at him. "*We* are. Acornstar wants to teach them they can't come onto our territory without being disciplined. She's waiting for more reason to attack, but a battle will come someday. It's impossible to avoid. Oh, and SageClan warriors know we're medicine cats; they know we stay away from Clan rivalries. We don't have anything to do with what our warriors are doing on the border."

The tom mewled excitedly and Ravenpaw noticed the river border nearing them. Mossrain got into a run and Ravenpaw instantly followed. He didn't really like the way the sun felt on his pelt, but he ignored it. His mind was whirling with the thoughts of battle. How had he not heard of this yet? He thought back to when he was getting close to becoming an apprentice, still a small kit that curled into his mother's stomach at night.

He faintly remembered patrols coming into camp with ruffled fur and going straight to Acornstar or Eagleclaw. Was that because of SageClan? *Our Clan leaders were kin; how did we shift so far apart?* The Clans shouldn't be fighting one another, but fighting *for* each other. He almost told Mossrain what he thought, but then decided against it.

"Alright, there's our watermint!" Mossrain padded into the shallow water without fear, though he did flinch at the water. Ravenpaw's face curled at the thought of walking into the river, but when his mentor called him with a flick of his tail, he forced himself to step into the river. It was icy cold and shivers ran through his bones. "Can you remember what it's for?"

"Uh..." Ravenpaw fought to think. He knew he had been told about watermint before, but he couldn't remember in the current moment. He was about to guess, but Mossrain must've known he had forgotten.

"If you don't know, don't guess. If you guess on what it does and it's wrong, you might end up thinking the wrong answer is the right

answer, and that will just be confusing! So, if you don't know, just tell me, it's okay. There's a lot of herbs and you've barely started your training." Mossrain sniffed at the watermint's leaves.

Ravenpaw looked at the water. "I... I don't know," he admitted finally.

"That's fine, Ravenpaw, it's easy to forget and hard to remember!" Mossrain still seemed happy, and his positive attitude always brightened the young apprentice whenever he was sad, even now. His mentor made it seem he had done nothing wrong. "Watermint is for bellyaches. The leaves are chewed into a pulp then eaten. Now, to get the leaves you'll want to bite right here—oh, look, I think that's Poppysong!"

Ravenpaw's mentor, as always, lost his train of thought and was looking across the river. Ravenpaw followed his gaze and saw a blurry brown cat bounding across the sloping hills of SageClan territory. He waited patiently until the cat was close enough for him to recognize, and he was happy to see it was the SageClan medicine cat and not a warrior that may not care that they're medicine cats.

"Mossrain?" Poppysong slowed as she approached, her chest heaving and her eyes tried, but she seemed to be in a good mood. "Are you here to collect some watermint, too? My warriors caught a group of sick rabbits and had a feast; now they're all complaining of bellyaches. Are your warriors having bellyaches, too?"

"Nope, all clear over here." Mossrain shook his head, tail flicking. "Where were the rabbits? Not too close to our border, right?"

Poppysong purred. "No, it was near CrowClan's border. Robinstar sent a patrol to let them know, but he's not sure if there's any more of them. No wonder the rabbits didn't run, right?" Her tail flicked and her eyes glowed despite the trouble inside her Clan.

"Oh, good! Well, we don't need much watermint, just enough in case a bellyache comes, so you take as much as you want. How many warriors are sick? Not too many that you don't have hunters, I hope. Oh, and you still have some territory that's safe to hunt in, right?" Mossrain's head tilted.

Ravenpaw suddenly felt the chill through is paws, and remembered he was standing in the icy water. He was tempted to move back, but he didn't want Poppysong to think he was scared of a little water. And, he wanted to seem apart of the conversation. "Do you think your warriors will be okay?" he asked quietly after Mossrain quieted.

Poppysong purred. "Oh, yes, they'll be fine. Thank you for caring." She dipped her head. "I need to get back to camp." She leaned her head down and began nosing through the stems to find the nicest ones. When she drew back with a large amount in her mouth, a few dropped out, but Ravenpaw quickly picked them up. She blinked her thanks at him and leaned forward to take them from his muzzle. As she did, their noses brushed softly, and the apprentice's skin shivered as he was sent spiraling into a vision.

Poppysong slipped through the gorse wall that protected the SageClan camp, and she cast her gaze around. Warriors lay around the clearing, some cleaning themselves while others groaned in pain. A small cream-furred tom with white paws, chest, muzzle, and belly flickered his gaze up. The medicine cat hurried over and dropped the stems next to the cat. She pressed a soft paw on his stomach, and she could feel his tense muscles bunching up, twisting and turning.

"More cats got stomach aches while you were gone," the tom groaned, his yellow eyes flickering weakly.

"Who's still healthy?" she asked, grabbing a watermint stem and passing it to the small tom.

"I know Swiftrunner and Ivypelt didn't eat the rabbits, Lilypaw too. A few warriors who ate don't have stomach aches yet, but I want them to rest in case." The tom took the stem from the medicine cat and began chewing, his lips weakly curling at the bad taste.

Poppysong turned and looked around the clearing. "Swiftrunner!" she called.

The warriors' den rustled and the young white and black tom emerged from the den. He hurried over. "Robinstar, are you okay?" he asked the small cream tomcat.

"I'll be good soon," Robinstar replied.

"Swiftrunner." Poppysong looked the young warrior in the eyes. "Take Ivypelt, Lilypaw, and any able warriors down to the river and soak some moss for everybody to drink," she ordered.

"Of course, Poppysong." Swiftrunner darted his head down in a quick nod then hurried off, calling a few warriors from the warriors' den and then going over the apprentices' den and calling for Lilypaw.

"Has StarClan spoken to you?" Robinstar asked, his voice dry.

"No." The medicine cat shook her head. "Just rest, Robinstar. Just rest..."

Ravenpaw was quiet, and he watched with wide eyes as Poppysong nodded to the two EchoClan cats before bounding away. Mossrain brushed against his side. "What did you see?" he asked softly.

"Her Clan..." He looked down at his paws, watching them waver under the water. "They're so sick..." How was she so good at hiding how she was feeling? She must be so worried underneath her happy shell. *Echo, I don't want to see stuff like this. I can barely handle visions about my own Clan. I can't watch another suffer...* he prayed up to the long-dead leader, hoping she got his message. He hated that BatClan was starving and he couldn't help. But to watch as warriors cried in pain and him not being able to help...

Mossrain's breath ruffled his ear fur as he leaned close, giving the apprentice his warmth. "I know it must be hard to see all these things, but I know your power has meaning. You're young, but as you get older, you'll learn to control it. Let's get back to camp, okay? You can spend time with your littermates or rest and I'll come back to get borage leaves, alright?"

Mossrain didn't wait for him to reply and led him from the water and onto the moor. Ravenpaw was close to mentioning that Mossrain had left his watermint behind, but his worry about SageClan overtook him. Poppysong might need more for her cats, and there were other herbs they had in storage for belly aches in EchoClan.

Ravenpaw stayed quiet on the way home, his eyes down at his paws and his heart sunken in his chest. Worry was still piercing his heart—would SageClan really be okay? He had already asked Mossrain many times on the way home, but the tom still wasn't bothered by it. "They'll be fine once they have some watermint," he'd say every time. "Don't worry about the vision."

But how can I not? he thought once again as they slowly started the climb up towards the clearing. He didn't even like seeing visions about his own Clan, about his own Clanmates. To see cats suffering and not being able to help... Claws dug deep into his heart. It was so unfair! Just because they lived in different territories meant they could die!

His claws scratched the ground painfully, but the burning took his mind away from SageClan. "Why don't you go see your littermates?" Mossrain meowed softly. "I'll head out to get some borage leaves and dock then come back and make sure you're doing okay. Does that sound okay?"

"That's fine... I think I'm going to rest." Ravenpaw left his young mentor alone and slipped silently to the medicine cat's den, heading for his nest. He wanted to visit Echo again—he had to talk to her. Curling up inside his nest, he tucked himself close to the moss and thought silently, *Echo, please, I need to talk to you. It's important—I'm sure you already know.* She could read his mind, so she might ignore his call to not answer his need.

Sighing, the tom closed his eyes, trying to sink into sleep, but he was still worried about Robinstar. The leader had looked so weak, along with all the warriors that lay, groaning, on the ground of their clearing. They had only two warriors and one apprentice well enough to get water. And that wasn't enough to hunt for a whole Clan.

Ravenpaw didn't know when he fell asleep through all his worried thinking, but he didn't care; he was just grateful to find himself standing in StarClan's dense forest, staring at Echo's bright green eyes. "Ravenpaw," she began softly, but he had the courage to cut her off.

"Please, Echo, I can't do this. It's... It's too much." He looked at his paws,

regret running through his soft muscles.

"Ravenpaw..." Echo softly shook her head and moved forward, pressing comfortingly against his side. He was desperate to feel the warmth from her fur, but it just had a cool, misty feeling. "I know it's scary, but you're young—you'll get used to this power you have."

He was shaking his head before she had even finished. "No, it's not just that. I feel different enough being a medicine cat, but I just want to be like everyone else. I don't want to be scared to look into the future and see a Clanmate dying, or seeing another Clan suffer knowing I can do nothing about it. It hurts... It hurts so much to know I can't do anything. I know it helped save Stormkit's life and I will always be so grateful for that, but I can't do this every day... I want to use normal ways to heal, not like this... And every moment I'm worried I'll go into the nursery and Goldenpool will have that bump on her side..." Even though he couldn't feel her fur, he tucked his head against her shoulder.

He felt her cool tail wrap around him. "Oh, young one... I remember this same feeling; just feeling so lost and indifferent from your kin. I didn't have ancestors to talk to about my power, so I was left alone with it. I never told anybody, except my mate. Even my kits didn't know. My power helped me see the world, and yours does too, but we are very different cats and we have very different powers. If you truly don't want them anymore, I can take them away, but you will never be able to get them back."

Ravenpaw looked up into her misty eyes. "Please, Echo... Please take away these powers. I just want to be normal."

She blinked softly at him. "Go one more day. Visit with your Clan—Goldenpool, your friends, your littermates, Dappletail, Mossrain. Talk to them, enjoy the day. I will visit you when you sleep next, and you can decide then if you want more time, want to keep your power or rid yourself of it. Go find the ones you love and care for, then you can decide."

Her form began to fade, and he watched silently as she disappeared, leaving him alone in the cold air. He sighed and closed his eyes, allowing himself to drift into a calming, dreamless sleep.

#1: What's your thought about Ravenpaw's decision to get rid of his power?

#2: Do you think Ravenpaw will go through with it?

Chapter Seventeen

When Ravenpaw awoke from sleep, Mossrain was gone, but the tom's scent was fresh inside the den, telling the young apprentice he had probably returned then left again. He yawned, stretching his muscles, and stood from his nest. He was stiff and sore, but he forced himself to ignore it and began cleaning his side.

I'll go see Goldenpool first and check on Stormkit, then I'll see how Willowpaw is, then I'll help out Jaypaw, and Blossompaw if she wants my help... He shook his head to clear his mind then hurried from the den, keeping his eyes down and taking a familiar non-existant path to the nursery. He slipped inside the small den and shivered as the warmth enveloped him, warming his cold skin.

"Ravenpaw, it's nice to see you." He looked over to see Goldenpool lying in her nest, tail flicking softly, while Stormkit, Heatherkit, and Dustkit crawled around by her belly. They were growing every day, and they were becoming quite noisy. He peered over the edge of the nest and saw Stormkit struggling to pin Heatherkit down, both of them wiggling and squealing.

Dustkit crawled over, his small half-open eyes squinted at his sisters. He pawed at Stormkit's head, mewling a high-pitched "No!" while he slowly pushed his head against Stormkit. The small solid brown tabby mewled in complaint as she fell backward and onto her back. Dustkit pawed at her face, climbing over her and stuffing her muzzle in his fluffy fur.

Goldenpool purred with amusement and used a large back paw to separate them. Ravenpaw flicked his ear, spying on the she-cat's side, but the strange bump wasn't there yet. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

Goldenpool purred with amusement. "I'm fine, Ravenpaw, you ask

every day." Her eyes were glowing and she looked at her tiny kits with undying love burning in her gaze. She was quiet for a moment before meowing, "I've helped so many queens have kits, but I never truly understood the love a mother had for her kits. I didn't have a mother—she died not long after I was born—so I never got to know how she would've felt. But now that I have them..." Her tone turned wistful. "I would do *anything* to protect them." She looked up at him.

Ravenpaw swallowed, his throat dry. The fierceness in her eyes made him shiver. He had always seen motherhood as absolute love and kindness, but the look in her gaze let him knew it was so much more. It was protectiveness—a need to raise her kits and keep them safe. She looked like she was ready to take on a fox to protect them, even now, lying peacefully in the camp, completely safe.

He noticed that her muscles were tight, and her legs were positioned so she could leap from her nest in a moment. "Goldenpool?" he mewed softly, his tail flicking fearfully.

She took her gaze from her kits and looked at him. "Yes?" He could see the readiness in her eyes. She was a medicine cat; a cat who healed, who saved lives, but she was ready to fight to the death.

"You're safe." He put a strain in his words.

Her eyes widened, then she looked at her paws. A soft chuckle came from her. "Is it really that noticeable?" she asked softly but didn't wait for a reply. "When I was a moon old, a group of stoats came into camp. It was leaf-bare and they were starving, and they attacked the nursery because they could smell kits. Our nest was the closest to the entrance, so the stoats attacked our nest. My mother died trying to protect me and my littermates. Chiveclaw had fallen asleep with Berrywhisker, and he fought them off, but not before they killed my brother..." Her eyes shimmered with fear. "I don't want that to happen to my kits."

Ravenpaw stayed silent, struggling to breathe. He could picture the scene in his head—a group of the small, skinny vermin slipping into the nursery and jumping into a nest of an unsuspecting queen; a cat who thought they were safe from harm, hidden in camp. *StarClan,*

why would you allow that to happen?

"Thank you for sharing with me, Goldenpool." He dipped his head and stood, touching the she-cat's ear with his nose, then he left the den. His mind spun in fear, but he did his best to ignore it and searched the clearing. StarClan must've been on his side because he spotted Oakcloud across the clearing speaking to Eagleclaw with a few other warriors. He raced over, his heart speeding up as Oakcloud began to follow Maskdapple to the forest entrance; they were going on patrol. "Oakcloud!" he called.

The brown tabby instantly stopped and turned his head. "Ravenpaw, is everything alright?" His tail flicked and his head moved towards the nursery. "Are they okay?" The apprentice knew who he was talking about immediately.

"They're fine, but Goldenpool is worried about what happened when she was a young kit, with her mother," he added when the tom looked confused. His eyes softened, and he looked over at Eagleclaw. The she-cat was already nodding.

"You go see her, I'll take your spot on the patrol. But you owe me!" Her eyes sparkled with amusement as she padded for the camp entrance after Maskdapple, Frostfall, and Russetdawn.

"I'll lead the tomorrow's dawn patrol—Thank you, Eagleclaw!" The tom nodded his thanks to Ravenpaw then hurried over to the nursery. Ravenpaw was tempted to follow, but he stopped himself. Oakcloud and Goldenpool would want time alone, so he would instead find his littermates. He started his search at the apprentices' den, but they weren't there—not even Willowpaw. He crawled out and looked around the clearing.

Elders' den, maybe? He headed over and spied through the ferns, but only Flamepaw was in there, searching through Dappletail's fur for ticks. "Flamepaw, do you know where Jaypaw and Willowpaw are?" he asked.

"Why would I know?" the tom grumbled, but then added after a moment, "Jaypaw is out with Foxpouce gathering moss at the bottom of the rocks, and Willowpaw left with Snowfern to the

moorland a little bit ago. Now leave me alone," he said over his shoulder, tail tip flicking in irritation.

"Thank you, Flamepaw." He ignored the older tom's bad attitude and hurried after Eagleclaw's patrol, scampering down the rocks and almost slipping. He mewled and dug his claws against the stone, winching at the sharp sound it created. He paused for a moment before continuing down the rocks, and relief flooded through him as he touched the grass. He perked his ears and focused on his surroundings, and he heard meows coming from deeper into the forest.

"Foxpounce, do you think Acornstar will stop Blossompaw and me from going to the Gathering?" It was Jaypaw, his tone tired and strained. Ravenpaw started slowly through the thick bracken in the direction of the conversation, scared of scratching himself on the sharp thorns that covered the forest.

"It depends if you behave in the next half moon. If you do as you're supposed to, I'll tell Acornstar you're ready for your first Gathering. But only if you follow orders." It was clear Foxpounce was a little annoyed, but sympathetic too.

His next words confirmed Ravenpaw's suspicion.

"You and Blossompaw got off a lot easier than the others; you just have to come and help gather moss, while they have to change the nesting and search for fleas and ticks. You're young, and you'll make mistakes, but you have to learn from them. That still doesn't give you the reason to disobey your leader, though!"

Ravenpaw pushed himself through some ferns and found himself looking at Jaypaw and Foxpounce, both sitting next to a tree with their claws clogged with moss. "Ravenpaw!" Jaypaw let out a sigh of relief and hurried over, awkwardly flicking moss from his paws as he went along. He pressed his muzzle against his brother's, murmuring a quiet, "help me!"

Ravenpaw purred with amusement and followed Jaypaw back to the tree, and he watched as Foxpounce sliced with thorn-sharp claws at the moss. He noticed Ravenpaw looking, and flipped the

moss with his claws. "See how smooth it is? You want to cut it so you don't get any soil or bark in it," he meowed. "Do you want to try?"

Ravenpaw scooted forward, reaching a paw to the lowest part of the trunk and digging into the thick moss. He kept his claws sheathed and tried to paw it down, but it didn't work. Foxpounce purred and walked around Jaypaw to help him.

"Here, do it like this." Foxpounce took out his claws and slipped a paw against the bark, curling them into the moss. With his other paw, he sliced at the back and slowly began to peel it from the wood. He dropped it in front of him, and rolled it up with his paws, pressing it firmly together. "Now it's easier to carry." He picked it up in his teeth for a moment before dropping it back down.

"That's how the moss is in the medicine cat's den," Ravenpaw meowed, happy to know more about Clan life and to be able to share his own knowledge; no matter how small it was. "We keep it where the sun can reach it and dry it—Mossrain says on warmer days like, in newleaf or greenleaf, he puts it on the Rock Pile."

Foxpounce nodded. "It's a good way to make sure moss is dry and ready for bedding." The tom seemed to be a natural mentor, not minding questions and teaching even in punishments.

"Foxpounce, do you remember your apprenticeship?" Ravenpaw asked as the tom went back to his spot on the other side of Jaypaw.

The ginger tabby purred. "Of course! Every cat remembers their apprenticeship; it turns you from kit to warrior—or to medicine cat," he added, and Ravenpaw shifted his paws happily. "I was your father's apprentice, you know."

"Really?" Jaypaw's tail flicked excitedly.

Foxpounce nodded quickly. "He taught me a lot; he's a good cat and an amazing warrior. You should be proud to have him as a father." He absently rolled up moss with his paw while his eyes shined with old memories.

"I am," Jaypaw meowed, eyes glowing.

"Me, too!" Ravenpaw chirped, not wanting to be left out.

Foxpounce bunched his shoulders as he brought in a big breath, then loosened his muscles as he breathed out, relaxing. "We should get back to camp—I'm sure the others need moss for the nests." He reached down and awkwardly picked up one of the many moss balls, tucking it under his chin. Ravenpaw watched with interest as he grabbed a second with his teeth.

His tail flicking, Ravenpaw rolled a small ball of moss with his chin towards his chest, managing to tuck it in, but it was threatening to slip out. Jaypaw nosed it up against his throat, and Ravenpaw blinked his thanks before grabbing a second bundle with his jaws. He helped Jaypaw with positioning his own moss ball under his chin, then once his jaws were full they headed off after Foxpounce.

The tom walked slow and continued to look back to make sure they were following, and Ravenpaw reflected on the thought that if he had become a warrior's apprentice, he would've wanted Foxpounce to train him. Jaypaw was lucky to have him to learn from. *But Mossrain is amazing,* he reflected. The talkative tom was great to spend time with; his endless stories and great enthusiasm brightened the young tom's mind everytime he thought about them. Already, he had learned so much.

Not as much about herbs and healing, but stories from the past; about the first cat he had saved—Stonecoat had gotten a bad infection after a skirmish with SageClan and Mossrain, Mosspaw back then, had cured it when Goldenpool was out trying to get herbs—and about helping his first litter be born. It had been Thorntail's litter; three kits, but the brown tabby had been the only one to make it to a warrior. His sister had died from an early leaf-fall greencough, and his brother had fallen on the rock path to the forest and broke his neck.

Both of those deaths had broken the young tom, but then his mother died... Ravenpaw remembered Mossrain telling him that him, Pebblepeak, and Thorntail had all been the best of friends even though the medicine cat was five moons older. Shaking his head,

the apprentice started up the rocky path to camp, his claws scratching against the hard stone.

Some moss dropped from under Jaypaw's chin, but it got caught in his thick chest fur. The tom flicked his ear in annoyance but stayed quiet about, not wanting to drop any more moss. When they made it to the camp, Foxpounce nodded to Jaypaw then to the elders' den, and then directed Ravenpaw to the medicine cats den. He himself padded off to the nursery.

Ravenpaw was a little crestfallen that Foxpounce didn't choose him to go to the nursery, but he shook his head clear and went to his den, taking a deep breath of all the mingling herb smells. *Burdock, catmint, chervil, dried oak, goldenrod...* He dropped the moss in the corner with the other piles and headed for the store, sniffing out a scent he didn't recognize.

He found it to be a pile of thin dark green spiky leaves. He could smell that it was dry, meaning it was found on soil, but it also had the same taste of something that came from the water. *Probably grows in the dry soil next to a river,* he decided.

"That's fennel—it helps with pain in the hips."

Ravenpaw whipped around, fur on end. He had expected any cat that came in would be Mossrain, but instead, Boulderclaw was standing there. "How do you know that?" he asked hesitantly. Why *did* his father know about herbs? He was the strongest warrior in all the Clans!

"Berrywhisker needed it all the time," he replied with a soft meow, coming over and nosing the spiky leaves, breathing in their scent. "I used to bring them to her all the time—Goldenpool and Mossrain always made sure it was stocked with fresh leaves in case she needed them again." He let out a sigh and stepped back, settling down on his haunches next to his son.

"You don't need to talk about her," Ravenpaw murmured, pressing into his father's thick side, enjoying the warmth of his fur and the smell of the forest waving from him. But Boulderclaw seemed to ignore his comment.

"My mother had gotten hip problems when she got older, so she ended up going to the elders' den earlier than normal. Goldenpool would give her fennel so she could come into the forest with me and Silverstrike; she had hated being away from the trees. I started coming very often to get fennel for her, so Mossrain had to make constant trips to get more. It feels like so long ago..." He looked at his paws. "About a season before you were born, she stopped leaving her nest. She was too weak."

Ravenpaw didn't know what to say, so he stayed there, enveloped in his father's warmth, taking deep breaths of his musty forest scent. He remembered all the times Boulderclaw had played with him as a kit, chasing moss balls and teaching him to launch at unsuspecting tails. At the moment, he felt more content than he had since he became an apprentice.

"I talked to Blossompaw today." Ravenpaw looked up at his father's broad muzzle, but he was still looking at the herbs. "I remember how close you two when you were when you were younger, but then she began to drift apart from you. She wouldn't say much, but I know my kits, Ravenpaw." He finally looked down, locking eyes with his small son. "She may act like she hates you, but she's hiding something. Maybe you can get through her shell."

The large tom leaned down towards Ravenpaw's face, and fear fluttered through his heart. What if they touched noses? Ravenpaw didn't want to see his father's future! He quickly ducked his head into Boulderclaw's chest, gripping the stone with his claws. "I love you," he murmured.

Boulderclaw's long bushy tail curled around his side. "I love you too." The tom rubbed his chin over his son's head before standing up and leaving the den on quiet paws, despite his large size and broad shoulders. Ravenpaw watched him leave silently and waited a few moments before slipping out after him.

His belly growled with hunger, and he quickly headed over to the fresh-kill pile, finding a plump vole and taking it in his jaws. He looked around, quickly spotting Blossompaw near the entrance to the apprentices' den, munching crankily on a finch. As he approached, she spat a wad of feathers out of her mouth. She

looked coldly at him.

"What do you want?" she growled.

His heart sunk at her rude tone, but he did his best to ignore it. He dropped the vole at his paws and mewed, "can I eat here with you?"

Her light green eyes were in slits. "Go ahead." She lashed her tail, and he was surprised when she didn't get up to leave. He settled down, his fur softly brushing her's, but she scooted away, grumbling rudely. "Keep to yourself, will you?"

"Sorry," he whispered, looking at his paws. He eyed his vole hungrily, but his stomach was twisted with fear. "Blossompaw, why are you pushing me away?" She whipped her head to look at him fiercely, eyes dark, but he did his best to ignore it. "We used to be so close, then you pushed me away and acted like I didn't exist. I didn't know how you would react to me being a medicine cat, but I didn't expect it to be like this... I really miss you..."

She looked at him with a gaze so icy and cold his breath got caught in his throat. "It's all about you, isn't it? The perfect little kit, always looking good in front of Snowfern and Boulderclaw, huh? You had to keep being special, you couldn't be normal like us! You had to be a medicine cat to stay the best in their eyes. You're so selfish, you know that? We could've been close again, but you wanted all the attention!"

He looked at her with scared eyes. "Blossompaw, what are you saying? I don't want to be special—I just want to heal instead of hurt!" His claws dug into the ground, his heart aching. "I don't want to be special!" he repeated. "I want to be as normal as I can be! I just want us to be close again." He gazed at his paws, waiting in silence for her to snap at him.

"I wish we could be, too." He looked up at her quiet voice but flinched yet again when he saw her stone-hard eyes. "But Snowfern and Boulderclaw will always love you more than they love me. So while you think about the past and playing with leaves, I'll be making my parents proud of me!" She stood up stiffly and stalked away, fur bristling.

He jumped up, racing after her. He stopped in front of her and tried to make his gaze strong, but his legs were shaking and his heart was dragging him down. "Snowfern and Boulderclaw love us all equally! We're all their kits, and nothing will change that!" A sob started in his throat as he whispered, "they'll always be proud of us, Blossompaw, no matter what we do."

She wasn't even fazed. "They don't seem too proud of me right now," she hissed, then shoved her way past him and stalked across the clearing to the Rock Pile, where she hid in the shadows by its side, her eyes slashing like claws over his pelt.

She does hate me... His paws heavy, Ravenpaw dragged himself past his sister and back into his den, going over to the herb store, and he began to pick out the dead leaves from the piles absent-mindedly. *She believes so much that Snowfern and Boulderclaw don't love her like they love me... How could she think that?* Yes, there were moments when their parents were disappointed in her behavior, but to think they didn't care about her...

What am I supposed to do? He couldn't let his sister live like this, stuck in the shadows of life and not enjoying herself. She wasn't making the best of her time as an apprentice, even though she would never be this age again. He and his littermates were all growing up by the day, becoming more mature and closer to becoming warriors and medicine cat, but yet Blossompaw hid behind a shell.

"You had to be special, you couldn't be normal like us!" Blossompaw knew he wasn't normal. She knew there was something different about him.

"I want to be as normal as I can be!"

That's what he had said. That he wanted to be normal; the same as everybody else. But with the power Echo gave him... It made him different. It made him just like Blossompaw had said he was. *If I want to be close to her again, I have to be normal...* He could never stop being a medicine cat, it's who he was, but he could stop being special. He was even more sure he wanted to rid himself of his power, now.

I still need to talk to Snowfern and Willowpaw, and Jaypaw, he added the last thought after a moment. He had spent time with his brother, but not enough. He hadn't talked to him, not alone. He hadn't eaten his vole yet, so maybe he could eat with his littermates once Willowpaw got back with Snowfern. Then he could talk to his mother, maybe his father again if they were together.

Then he would know—he would talk to everybody he was close to, then he would tell Echo his decision.

Ravenpaw waited outside his den, kneading the ground with his paws in fear. His mother was still out with Willowpaw, while Jaypaw was helping weave bracken and bramble stems into the walls of the nursery and the around the entrances to the other dens. They were preparing for cold a leaf-bare, and the weaved undergrowth would help with protection from the wind and snow.

They were making the entrances smaller and filling all the holes that had began to poke through, testing their paws against it and breaking off extra pieces so it still looked nice. Boulderclaw and Oakcloud were working side by side on the nursery with Jaypaw adding some stems to a pile before settling down near them.

Grayblaze walked over with his muscles rippling under his pelt. "Try it like this," the tom said in his deep, rough meow, sitting down and using his paws and teeth to weave a small piece of bracken to cover a hole. The large gray tom had always been the best at weaving dens, and was in charge of making sure it was done correctly.

After helping Jaypaw, he padded over to where Maskdapple and her apprentice Featherpaw were weaving at the entrance to the warriors' den, and he brought his head close, sniffing the fronds, then backed away with a dip of his head to the older warrior. Ravenpaw almost asked if he could help, but he decided against it—even though the tom was kin, he had never really liked Grayblaze. The tom was gruff and didn't seem to care much about anything except battle training and building dens.

And he fights with Snowfern, he added to himself, and suddenly realized Grayblaze wasn't supposed to be using his paw. He spied

close on the tom's large flat paws, and he noticed how much he flinched and how hesitant he was with the injured paw. *I need to tell him to take it easy,* he thought, but fear pierced his heart.

Standing up, he hurried past the tom and went to the nursery, flicking Jaypaw with his tail then lashing it out of the way when his brother clawed at it playfully. He slipped inside and instantly felt relief as the warm milky air surrounded him.

"Another visit, Ravenpaw? Is everything okay?" Goldenpool was—of course—laying in her nest with her tail flicking softly while her small kits fed from her stomach.

He nodded his greeting, mewling happily to the small kits, then he looked at the nursing medicine cat with worried eyes, kneading the ground. "Grayblaze is using his paw; it looks like it hurts him." Nervousness went through him. *What if Goldenpool knows and allowed it? Am I just annoying her? Great StarClan, I'm a mouse-brain!*

He let out a calming breath when he saw that the golden tabby knew nothing about it, judging by her curled face. "Oh, Grayblaze, you—" She cut herself off, and looked at him. "Thank you for telling me. Will you stay here while I go speak to him?" she asked.

"Of course!" Sudden excitement fizzled through his skin and he waited for the medicine cat to stand up and begin walking away, then he curled up where she had been laying in the moss next to the wiggling kits. They nudged their noses on his stomach, and he mewled in amusement at their confusion of why they couldn't get milk.

He nuzzled Stormkit, taking a deep breath of her milky scent, his heart falling slow and peaceful. He closed his eyes, completely focused on the tiny kit, but he flicked his tail over Heatherkit and Dustkit so he knew if something happened. Her wet nose brushed against the skin on his neck as she curled closer, sending a shiver down his spine.

I can't lose her, he thought silently, relaxing into her sweet kit-scent. His mind spun with the question of her future, and he decided to lean his head back, shift until he was in front of her muzzle, and

gently touched her twitching nose.

Stormkit was probably three to four moons old, her kit fluff just beginning to disappear into a smooth brown tabby pelt. The fur around her face was thick and rounded, and her eyes were a large, beautiful gold with streaks of darker colors. Her long thin tail hung limply behind her, trailing over the bright grassy ground of the EchoClan camp clearing.

He watched in silence as Oakcloud padded on soft paws, his eyes dull and full of sorrow. "Stormkit." His mew was deep and husky with sadness. "Would you like to come down to the forest with me?" he asked softly.

But kits aren't supposed to leave camp, *Ravenpaw thought, then decided that Oakcloud had a good reason to bring his daughter out of camp. He wanted to stay with Stormkit, but he could feel something tugging him to the nursery. He allowed himself to be pulled over to the den, slipping inside. Even though his fur brushed the bracken, they didn't move out of the way—he couldn't even feel them.*

He looked around the den and saw, curled up in a nest, was Frostfall, with her belly beginning to round with unborn kits. Who's the father? *She didn't have a mate currently, and the only open tom would be Grayblaze.* Are these kits going to be my kin? *Excitement fizzled through his fur, but it suddenly died when he noticed that Heatherkit was curled up with the white she-cat, and Goldenpool was nowhere to be found.*

"Heatherkit, do you want to go outside?" Frostfall mewed softly, giving the kit a lick on her head. "It's a nice day, and I'm sure Stormkit would be happy if you went out."

Heatherkit let out a quiet mewl of sadness. "But they're gone..." the she-kit whispered. "They're really gone..."

Fear ran through his coat, but he couldn't get his mind to work. "Oh, Heatherkit," Frostfall murmured. "You can't change what happened. But do I know that Goldenpool and Dustkit wouldn't want you to mourn them; they want you to live."

Goldenpool and Dustkit die? *Ravenpaw struggled to breathe, his breath caught in his throat.*

"Ravenpaw, are you okay?"

His eyes flashed open, and he found himself staring into large glowing golden eyes. "Goldenpool..." He quickly leaned forward and rubbed against her muzzle, his heart pounding. He looked down at the kits he was still curled up with, and he saw little Dustkit, mewling as he crawled over Heatherkit.

Why... This is why he couldn't have this power. All it showed him was sadness and death. "I need to go..." He stood up quickly from the nest and slipped past the she-cat, his spine quivering.

"Ravenpaw, are you okay?" Goldenpool called after him, her mew filled with worry.

"I'm fine..." He didn't even look back as he left the den, moving quickly across the clearing, scared of meeting anyone else. He hadn't got to finish his plan, but it didn't matter. He didn't want the chance of seeing the future that would forever change him. He would be terrified for moons for when Goldenpool and Dustkit died... He couldn't do this.

He reached his den, and he hurried inside and tucked himself inside his nest, struggling to calm his breathing. *Echo, please, come to me. You know my choice.* He twitched in the dry moss, feeling every small bit of bramble in the nest poke at his skin, noticing the spots where it was weaker and not as comfortable.

His chest felt stuffed, curled up in the nest, so he rolled until he was twisted onto his back, opening up his belly and allowing fresh air into his muzzle and down into his lungs. He took a deep breath, focusing on where he usually met with Echo, slowing his breathing and sinking into his mind. It felt like moons before he finally drifted into sleep.

He looked around him, searching anxiously for Echo's misty frame, and fear began to crawl up his fur when she didn't show. Then, her form appeared from some thick ferns. "I didn't want to come," she admitted.

"One day, you'll regret this, you know." Her green eyes sparkled with sadness.

Ravenpaw gave a sad nod. "I know, but I can't do this. I just want to be normal," he mewed, tail flicking softly. "I'm sorry..."

"It's fine, young one." The pretty she-cat walked forward and touched her nose to his forehead. "Since your request, I have been checking on our future enemies. They will take time getting here, enough that I can try to train another. You can be free from your burden if you really want, but you'll never be able to get your power back."

Ravenpaw looked down as she continued.

"Remember these powers saved Stormkit's life, warned you of Goldenpool's future, showed you to tell your father about his mother, let you know of a future kitting—it has shown you death, but it has shown you life, as well." She let out a soft breath. "Think hard about this, Ravenpaw. It will forever change your future."

Ravenpaw stayed looking at the ground for a moment, then softly raised his head, looking Echo right in the eyes. "Will I still get to see the past?" he asked quietly.

"If you want." She gave a slow nod. "I can show you normally until I find another to train, then I will focus on them. But, I can still continue showing you, just slowly, until the next cat is caught up. Then, you can learn together. If you still want to by then. Or, you can keep your power, continue learning about the past and saving lives. It will be tough, it was for me, too, but one day it will all be worth it. It is your choice, Ravenpaw. But not yours alone. You have cats you can talk to."

They stared at each other for many long moments in complete silence, with Ravenpaw thinking wildly as Echo clearly read his mind, following each thought like a hunter on a mouse. When he finally decided, he knew he couldn't speak aloud about his decision, so he just thought it. I want to know the truth, but I want to be normal.

Echo nodded. "Go inform Mossrain and Goldenpoolof your choice. Then travel to the Moonstream and I will remove your power. Only there are you close enough to StarClan that I can take it back."

"How did you give it to me, then?" he asked. "I never went to the Moonstream before I had it."

Echo purred softly. "StarClan must still have its mysteries, young one. Go and speak to your mentor. You can still choose, so choose wisely." Her form shimmered, and she was gone in the blink of an eye.

#1: What do you think about Ravenpaw's choice?

#2: Do you think Ravenpaw will really get rid of his power?

Chapter Eighteen

Rowanpaw was disappointed when he woke and found himself alone in the low bush he and Emberheart had made a nest in. He felt cold without the touch of her warm stomach, and he shifted uncomfortably and peeked outside through the leaves. He could see the young kits Fern, Meadow, and Primrose by the pool of water, mewling playfully as they tussled while the silver tabby she-cat watched them with happy blue eyes.

Rowanpaw felt anger grow inside of him. He had never been able to do that—play with Blazepaw with no worry, no cat telling him how to wound an enemy or what move to kill a piece of prey with. The silver tabby was watching them silently, chuckling in amusement when one of the kits rolled away or when they tackled their littermate. They were hungry and weak, but yet they were still playing and being kits; no care in the world.

The apprentice swallowed his anger and crawled out from under the bush, shaking out his fur. Pain ran through his stomach, his muscles twisting in hunger. He licked his lips, feeling the dryness of his throat. He looked around for his Clanmates, but none of them were there. The only cats were the silver tabby with the kits and a broad black tom with yellow eyes.

Grinding his teeth together, Rowanpaw forced himself over to the tom. "Do you know where my Clanmates are?" he asked.

The tom looked over at him. "Rowanpaw, right?" He ignored the apprentice's question. "I'm Hickory."

"Great to know," he grumbled sourly. "Where are they?" His tail lashed.

Hickory's ear twitched, showing he was upset, but he hid it well. "Emberheart went out with Hazelfur, and Birchsplash went hunting with Rohan and Aspenheart." His eyes went dark with interest. "You're Ratpaw, aren't you?"

Rowanpaw's spine fur lifted. "I don't know what you're talking about." Despite him trying to stop it, his lips curled back.

Hickory blinked, seemingly unfazed. "After you went to nest with Emberheart, I got talking to Hazelfur. I asked why you had been so upset, and she said it was personal. How you've reacted to Aspenheart whenever you see her, and how you left right when she said Rohan was the father of her first litter—the father of you." He gave a small nod. "I'm smarter than you may think."

Rowanpaw stared him down, eyes harder than ice. "If you dare tell *anyone*—" The black tom cut him off.

"I get it, kit. You don't want Aspenheart or Rohan to know." He brought up a paw, licked his pad, then ran it over his face. "Go find somebody who actually *wants* to talk to you." He stood up and stalked away, lashing his tail in Rowanpaw's face. The young tom took a quick step back, snorting in anger.

But he once again swallowed his pride and anger and padded over to the water, taking a big gap between himself and the kits, and began to drink. The fresh washed down his throat and send happiness through him. The feeling of the cold, clean water made it feel amazing. He flinched heavily when a bundle of fur rammed into his side. He whipped his head over, water dripping from his dirty muzzle, and stared into the glowing amber gaze of the solid brown she-kit Primrose.

"Sorry!" she mewled, her tail lashing playfully. "Do you wanna play with us?" she asked, jumping into a playful crouch and wiggling her haunches around.

Rowanpaw swallowed his breath, watching the small she-kit with guarded eyes. The carefree look in her eyes made his heart ache with pain. Why had he never been able to feel that? The only time he had tried to be free and have fun, he had gotten his best friend killed and almost lost his brother. His chest tightened when sadness washed through her eyes and she stood up straight.

"Is everything okay?" she mewled softly, tilting her head. "You can be the fox if you want!" Her tail flicked excitedly.

"Primrose, he might not want to play," the silver tabby said softly.

But the excitement of being a kit again filled Rowanpaw, and he suddenly dropped down into a crouch, puffing his tail so it looked like a fox's. He playfully bared his teeth. "I'm gonna get you!" he growled lightly.

Primrose squealed with glee and bounded away to her sisters, who mewled and followed her to a bush across the garden. Stretching his muscles, Rowanpaw launched himself after them, circling the outside of the bush with a flicking tail. A pale pink nose appeared from the small leaves with a small tabby gray paw, but he pattered at it with soft toes and it disappeared with a squeak.

"We have to keep moving to the Twoleg den!" Fern, the smallest of the litter with short gray fur, mewled quietly to her sisters, her pale yellow eyes glowing from a small gap, and she squealed when Rowanpaw jumped down and stuck his face close.

"I'm coming for you!" he called, sticking his nose against the ground and wiggling forward. He got his muzzle through the branches, but soft paws hitting his muzzle made him retreat. He blinked his eyes, using a paw to get rid of a leaf that had stuck to his eyelid, then he looked back into the bush.

He was surprised to see only Fern and Primrose crouched inside. He stood up and looked around the garden, and he spotted a striped gray tail disappeared into another bush across the garden. *Nice trick,* he thought, then launched across the clearing with a playful growl. He heard Meadow yowl in surprise as he cannoned next to the push, pushing a paw through a small gap, and he felt her soft fur brush against his pad. Meadow squealed and scrambled away.

In the corner of his eye, Rowanpaw saw Primrose racing from her hiding spot with Fern, though the smallest kit was still hesitating at the first bush. Leaving Meadow behind, Rowanpaw raced for Primrose. She saw him coming and mewled in excitement, sliding to a stop and racing back to Fern. He pushed hard on his paws, but she disappeared before he got there, and he quickly slammed his paws into the grass.

But he had been going too fast, and he rammed into the solid wooden wall that surrounded the garden. Pain flared through one of his legs, but he flicked it away with a quick shake. He rolled onto his other side and saw Primrose and Fern hurrying from the bush. Thinking fast, he forced himself into a quick crouch and jumped forward, carefully grabbing Fern and pulling her into his chest. She mewled in excited fear.

"Primrose! Help me!" she wailed as Rowanpaw pinned her and playfully pattered his paws at her stomach. She pawed for his face, her muzzle twisted in excitement. Thorn-sharp kit-claw dug into his back. He shook his fur softly and Primrose fell off with a huff. He turned to paw at her face but a third kit attacked. He turned to pick Meadow off of his back with a soft tug, but Primrose attacked his face while Fern tugged at his legs.

Letting out a fake cry of pain, Rowanpaw toppled over to the side, doing it slowly enough that the kits had enough time to jump away. But right as his side hit the grass, the three kits were on him again, pushing at his fur with excited paws.

"Alright, that's enough!" The silver tabby padded over and nudged them off with her nose, then she helped Rowanpaw to his feet. "You're good with them. I'm Rain." She dipped her head to him while the kits cannoned off to the water. "Thank you for playing with them."

"Sure," he meowed softly, his heart feeling weak. How could he not play with them? They were kin; his younger siblings. "I'm going to find Emberheart now." He respectfully dropped his head and turned around, padding over to the Twoleg den and slipping inside. He passed over the fluffy ground and slunk through the cat flap, shaking out his fur when he got free.

"Rowanpaw, you're up!" He looked over to see Emberheart lying in the pale grass. Her coat looked cleaner than usual, and he noticed the ground around her was darkened with dust and soil. "Come roll in the grass, it helps clean your fur without licking it clean." She dropped onto her back and wiggled around, her legs flopping back and forth.

Rowanpaw purred in soft amusement, going over and dropping into the grass. He flipped over and rolled around, loving the feeling of the ground scratching against his dirty skin. After a few moments of contentful rolling, he got up and shook his coat, looking back down at the ground. It was coated with a thin layer of dust and soil. "It definitely feels better," he admitted.

"And it looks better!" Emberheart purred, getting to her paws and shaking out her fur, her drooping stomach swinging from side to side. It was still too thin for the normal size of an expecting queen, but it was bigger than before. Her kits would be weak, but Rowanpaw knew they'd survive.

Rowanpaw was quiet for a moment, content once again with the thin breeze flowing into his lungs. This place was so much better than his territory, with real grass and a fresh breeze, but his heart still ached to be back into the murky depths, despite his hate of the mud and guck that stuck to his paws. He knew the moment he was back, he'd want to leave again.

But Blazepaw's there, he thought, picturing his brother's glowing brown eyes and heavy whiskers. His heart ached to see his brother again. "Emberheart?" he meowed quietly, looking up at the bright blue sky dotted with fluffy clouds.

"Yeah?" She walked over and touched his cheek with her nose before settling into a sit beside him, sides pressing together.

"When will we start heading home?" he asked.

She let out a sigh, and he could almost hear the longing she felt for her home, and probably for Heronclaw. "Soon, hopefully. Once everybody is back we're going to ask about finding a place that has something that could help us. It's a long shot, but they may know somewhere useful to us. Then we can finally go back home," her mew turned wistful.

Rowanpaw let out a heavy sigh, sinking into the she-cat's side, letting all his wants and worries disappear into the back of his head, and he focused on the quiet moment of staring up at the sky with his mentor. He loved the feeling of worrying about nothing, of just

enjoying the silence and the feel of the grass against his skin.

This is what I want, he thought silently, *I want this to be Clan life.* Resting in peace, forgetting about the hunger he and his Clanmates felt for just one moment... He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with air. He never wanted this feeling to leave.

All Rowanpaw wanted to do was dig his claws into something when he saw Aspenheart return. He loathed the happy look on her face, and he found himself sinking into Emberheart's side to stop himself from launching at her with claws out. "Isn't it a nice day?" the she-cat meowed with a bright mew while Rohan, Birchsplash, and Hazelfur approached with prey clamped in their jaws. Hazelfur had a finch, Birchsplash held two rats by their tails, and Rohan carried a third rat, larger than the other two.

"Nice hunting!" Emberheart purred, tail flicking.

"Yeah," Rowanpaw agreed sourly, "where's your prey, Aspenheart?" His eyes glittered cruelly.

The she-cat looked rather surprised, but after a moment she meowed, "well, I've never been too good of a hunter," she explained with a twitch of an ear.

"Really?" Rowanpaw tilted his head slightly, lips curled back. "You grew up learning how to hunt but yet can't catch anything? What *can* you do?" His ears flattened.

"Rowanpaw," Emberheart started quietly, but Aspenheart stopped her.

"No, it's okay. I knew I'd have troubles when I finally ran into some of my old Clan. To answer you, Rowanpaw, I guess I find myself as a queen instead of a warrior." She tried to look kind and unbothered.

The young apprentice couldn't help but scoff in scorn. "You call abandoning your kits being a queen?" His anger was beginning to boil under his skin, his claws burning like flames rushing through a dry forest; destroying everything in its path.

Aspenheart looked upset, causing his flaming hatred to roar even louder. "You have no idea how many times I've wished I stayed. The only thing keeping me from going back was the thought of them being dead. And now to know they're alive..." She dropped her head. "I could've been there for them, to watch them grow up. But I left, and I will *never* forgive myself for that. My only hope is that they did forgive me..." A sob caught in the she-cat's throat.

Rowanpaw stared at her with cold, narrowed eyes. "They didn't." At his words, she looked up, eyes wide with surprise and sadness. "They hate you because they know the cat that you really are, and they'll never forgive you for it. So don't bother thinking about them being your kits, because they're *not!* They never were."

With his fur standing straight up, Rowanpaw turned and stalked back into the Twoleg den, tail lashing behind him. He went into the garden and to the pool of water, leaning down and taking long, cooling sips from the fresh water source. Small paws battered at his haunches. He whipped his head around, eyes fierce, to see small Fern sitting back on her legs with a straight spine.

She mewled with fear and tucked herself down, eyes wide with terror. Shame burned Rowanpaw's fur. "I'm sorry!" she squealed.

He sighed, lowering himself down until his muzzle was against the ground. "No, I'm sorry." He stared at her with apologetic eyes, feeling awful that he had scared the small kit.

She blinked, clearly still upset, but then she wiggled forward and nudged Rowanpaw's cheek with her nose. "Are you okay?" she murmured.

He was surprised by her sudden change; from fear to worry, but also reflected on how much he already cared for the little kit. She deserved a better mother than Aspenheart; she deserved a Clan. But not BatClan. She deserved to live in EchoClan, under the protection of the trees and undergrowth, growing up with strong, powerful hunters that could keep her safe.

How does Dawnstar ever expect to win a fight against them? Rowanpaw thought. Emberheart had told him why Dawnstar had chosen

EchoClan, and it did make sense, though it seemed mindless to attack any of their neighbors. CrowClan was small in numbers, but the broad-bodied warriors had long, deadly claws and sharp teeth that made great wounds. They were slippery, using a pond in their territory for prey by swimming through the clear water.

Meanwhile, SageClan's small lean bodies and long legs were too much for BatClan warriors with their slow, weak frames.

The EchoClan warriors were, in fact, probably their best bet. The cats were large and powerful, but they were confident as well. They had a moorland in their territory, which meant some of their warriors were also fast and quick, but still had the large body to run in the forest as well. They apparently also climbed trees, so that meant they were light enough to get high into the branches and stalk above them for silent attacks.

I hope this plan works out, he thought.

"Rowanpaw?" He was brought back to the present by Fern's small mew, and he stared into her caring eyes, feeling weak.

"Don't worry, Fern, I'm fine." He gave her forehead a lick and stood up, stretching out his legs in turn before turning around. His fur began to bristle as Aspenheart and Rohan walked in side by side and sat in the middle of the garden, followed by Emberheart and her Clanmates. Flicking his tail, he hurried over and pressed close to Emberheart, using her swelling side as a comfort to stop him from hurling forward with claws unsheathed.

"So, I don't think it's truly been discussed yet—why have you come from BatClan?" Rohan pushed the finch and one of the smaller rats to the Clan cats while giving the other small rat to his kits and allowed his cats to share the larger one. The Clanmates silently agreed that Emberheart would get the finch, despite the glare in her eyes, while Birchsplash split the rat for the rest of them.

"Our Clan is dying," Birchsplash meowed when he finished dividing the rat between him, Hazelfur, and Rowanpaw. "We won't be able to survive leaf-bare like this—we need more territory. Dawnstar—our leader—has decided to attack EchoClan before leaf-bare comes

to try to take the forest around the Gathering Hollow, so we have prey-rich territory to hunt in. But in order to beat them, we need strength; we need more prey. Dawnstar was hoping there would be something in the Twoleg Place to help us. We've found prey that could help keep our cats alive, but the air is too thick and dry for many of our Clanmates, we're barely healthy enough in our own home. Most of our warriors wouldn't make a single hunting trip here..."

Seemingly broken, Birchsplash dropped his head and silently stared at his paws, ears flattened. Rowanpaw, who just finished swallowing a morsel of his prey, licked his lips and watched the tom with slight sadness. Rowanpaw still felt hate for the black and white tom, for the cat who forgave the Clan traitor so easily, but he forced it away at the moment and focused on Rohan, who's brown eyes reminded him so much of Blazepaw's it hurt.

"If your Clanmates couldn't make a single hunting trip in here, why are you so far from your home?" Rohan looked over them. "It doesn't make sense to look so far for something you'd never be able to use."

Emberheart, who had just finished her finch, looked at her feather-covered paws, eyes dull. But she finally looked up and meowed, "because, beyond anything, our Clan needs hope. And if we return with nothing... They will lose the last bit of hope they have left. We need to find something to help them, or we will never survive to see the new season."

Rohan and Aspenheart looked at each other, eyes having a silent conversation, then the dark brown tabby looked over at his cats, looking at them with an unreadable expression. "There is nothing here to help you. This is the only den left that is liveable, the only place where there is a sanctuary." He looked back at the Clan cats. "There is nothing left here except soot-stained prey and this garden."

"Then why do you stay?" Hazelfur meowed softly. "Why haven't you left to find somewhere in the forest, past the Clan territories? You could even try to join one, EchoClan, maybe. They've let in cats before; one of our own, actually."

"You mean Snowfern?" Aspenheart cut in softly, then she shook her head. "Our kits cannot travel through the Twoleg Place. We have thought about leaving, many times, since before they were born, but there was no reason to. We're safe here, no matter how bad it may be. I do miss BatClan, but—" before the she-cat could finish, she was interrupted by a shrill screech from outside the garden, from what sounded like the front of the Twoleg den.

The Clan cats jumped, while the Twoleg cats flicked their ears and looked around worried. "What was that?" Emberheart dug her claws into the ground, and Rowanpaw pressed against her, his breathing heavy and his heart racing.

"The foxes." Rohan looked at Hickory. "Quickly, take Rain and Copper hunting, don't come back until you find something." Rohan jumped up and went to his kits, who were now at the paws of the ginger she-cat Rowanpaw didn't know the name of. "Kits, get into the brambles." He nosed them to the very back of the garden, where a patch of prickly thorns was packed tightly, with a small tunnel leading inside to probably a small protective den.

"If foxes are coming, why did you send out three of your cats?" Birchsplash walked over to the dark tabby that had left his kits. "We need all the protection we can get!"

"To get prey!" Rohan snapped, his fur beginning to bristle, but he took a breath and made it lower back down, though his tail tip was still flicking lightly. "The foxes have been here for countless moons; they come and we give them prey, then they leave us alone for a while. It's been like that since before I was born." The tom looked away, seemingly embarrassed.

The Clan cats were silent, not knowing what to say. Fury was flaring through Rowanpaw, and after a moment he hissed, "Those foxes only keep coming because you don't fight back! You're such a mouse-heart, giving into those creatures!"

"Rowanpaw!" A paw flashed over his ear, cuffing his head, and he looked over with hard eyes at Emberheart, but the she-cat stared right back. "Hold your tongue! This isn't your place to speak!" The cold glare in her eyes made the apprentice's heart weak, and he

forced himself to drop his gaze to his paws, though anger still rolled through him like a storm.

"He's right, though," Birchsplash meowed darkly, standing up and stalking closer to Rohan, and the older tom backed up a bit. Even though Birchsplash was skinny from starvation, he still had warrior training and would be much fiercer in a battle than Rohan would be. "You act like you're free here, but those foxes have you trapped like prey! If you keep this up, one day it'll be your kits dealing with those foxes!" The black and white tom's tail lashed through the air.

"Don't you think I know that?" Rohan growled. "We've tried to stop giving them prey in the past, but it doesn't work! If we don't feed them, they'll attack the garden, and we can't survive that kind of attack..." his mew broke. "Last time we tried to stop giving them prey, I lost my father *and* my sister. I won't make that mistake again."

Birchsplash stared at him coldly. "You're rat-brained if you think you can continue on like this," he hissed. "We will not sit around and wait for those foxes to come!"

The two toms stood nose to nose, fur bristling, tails lashing, ears flat, and claws tearing at the ground. It was clear in the next few moments, one of the toms was going to launch themselves forward. Which one would attack first was unclear, and at the moment, the winner was hazy, too.

Author's Note

So, recently, school has started for me, making it much harder to write. Writing this story depends on my mindset and when I'm not busy, so I could finish a chapter in one week or three. To keep my stress low I've decided to update randomly, whenever I finish my chapters. I know it's annoying when authors don't have an update schedule, but my main focus is keeping down my stress since I have always had a problem controlling it. Writing helps me calm down, though I've recently started a private book which I very much enjoy, though I still love this one and have a great plan for it.

Hopefully, I'll have one, *maybe* two chapters up every month, so I hope you all continue to enjoy. This book is actually getting close to reaching its end! I'm excited about the second book because it will go more into apprenticeship training and growing up. I'm kinda amazed that this book is almost over but only about a moon (a month) has gone by! WOW. I'm impressed with myself, really, because I feel the story has been developing nicely despite the small time zone inside the story. I really hope all my current readers do continue to enjoy this story!

Once again, I'm sorry for deciding on a random update schedule, but it will help me stay calm. I'm really excited for the future of this story, and I hope the current readers and future readers end up enjoying it as much as I do!

Chapter Nineteen

Birchsplash and Rohan were having a stare off from opposite sides of the garden.

The BatClan members were grouped close near the entrance to the Twoleg den, while the Clan-less cats were by the pool of water. The two toms had ruffled fur, with Birchsplash's muzzle torn by a scratch mark and Rohan with a small nick in his ear. It had been a quick scuffle that was broken by Hazelfur and a ginger-pelted loner.

It turned out that the ginger she-cat's name was Wish, which Rowanpaw thought was quite stupid. It didn't make too much sense, but then again, neither did the rest of the Twoleg Place cats names. He could hear names like Rain or Fern being turned into Clan names-maybe Raincloud and Ferntail-but Wish, Primrose, Meadow, Rohan, Copper; they seemed to make no sense. Hickory, maybe, but Rowanpaw didn't really know.

Rowanpaw absently picked at his claws with his teeth, cleaning out the soil and spitting it out with disgust. It felt nice to have them clean, though his pads were still raw and burning from the soot-stained Thunderpath. Bored, he lay his head on his paws, tail flicking softly. His ears perked in interest as Emberheart spoke quietly into Hazelfur's ear.

The light brown she-cat looked excited, and she looked at Rowanpaw with happy eyes, with Emberheart following her gaze to her apprentice's. "Rowanpaw, how would you like to do some battle training with Hazelfur?"

The young apprentice felt a flash of excitement, and his tail flicked. "Yes!" He had done barely any battle practice, and he would rather do it with Emberheart, but with her expecting kits it would be hard. And, apparently, Hazelfur was one of the best fighters in the Clan, which was said by not only Dawnstar but also the senior warriors Brackenfoot and Brownear.

"Great!" Hazelfur scrambled to her paws, eyes shining despite her weak form. "Let's work over there!" She hurried over to the other side of the garden, still against the side of the Twoleg den. "Let's start with the back rake. It'll be the best move to use against EchoClan-with their large size, they'll be slower than us, even in this state. And scratching their spine will make it hard for them to climb to get a height advantage."

Rowanpaw nodded, taking in the information.

"Another good thing is to attack their legs, that will also help keep them on the ground, and if you get their back legs it'll stop them from leaping at us; it's another one of their talents. If you land on their back, bite their scruff and pull and shake, it will throw them off. But be ready for them to roll over, trying to flatten you under them to gain control. You can't let them." The she-cat flicked her tail. "What approach would you use in a fight against an EchoClan opponent using the information I've given you?"

Rowanpaw let out a slow breath, trying to sort through everything he had learned. "They're slower than us, bigger than us, so I should use my speed and size against them." Once she nodded, he continued, "I should try to jump onto their back and hold on with my claws, and if I can grab their neck, too. If they try to flip me under them, I'll jump away, but then immediately jump back while they're still down. I'll grab onto their back leg, and try to scratch their stomach. If I were them, I'd give up by then." He felt proud of himself.

"What if they stop you from jumping on their back?" Hazelfur meowed.

"What?" He felt a flash of confusion. "Well, I'd..." His entire plan went around getting on their back. "I'd try to get on again?" he said slowly.

"Are you asking or telling?" Hazelfur's head tilted softly.

"Uh, telling..." He looked at his dark paws.

"Well, it probably wouldn't work." Hazelfur stood and flexed her

claws, muscles rippling over her skinny body. "They would be expecting you to try it again; you need to choose a different approach."

"Like what?" His head tilted slightly. Hazelfur jerked his head for him to stand, and he did so.

"You tried going over, so now try to go under." Right as she finished, she launched herself forward, sliding down to the ground. As she went under his chest, she suddenly flipped so she was on her back, and she pushed at his stomach with all four paws, sending him flying away. He landed with a thump, pain flooding through his side, but he forced past it and struggled to his paws.

He was angry with himself for not being able to stop the she-cat, and he stayed where he was, breathing heavy, looking at the ground. He heard Hazelfur walking over, and saw her whiskers in the corner of his eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

At that moment, he spun towards her and pushed from the ground, throwing his weight onto her chest and sending them backward. The she-cat crashed into the ground, letting out a big puff of air as her lungs deflated. He was tempted to dig his claws into the other cat's chest, but he forced himself to step away, tail flicking.

Hazelfur flipped over and got to her paws, shaking out her fur. "I thought trickery suited you," the she-cat said after a moment.

His anger dying, Rowanpaw tilted his head and asked, "trickery?"

She nodded, still trying to catch her breath. "Warriors use different tactics when attacking. Birchsplash likes to pretend to be slow in the beginning, then switch to speed. I like to go in looking like a scared she-cat not wanting to fight." Her eyes flashed with memories. "I'm sure you can wonder how that would end."

"But you said I like trickery?" He felt excited at finding out how he would fight, how he would sink his claws into his enemies and make them beg for mercy. He felt the need for battle rise inside his

chest.

"You like to use tricks to fool your enemies. You pretend to be injured, defeated, weak-you make your enemies think they've won, and when they let their guard down, you attack." Rowanpaw dug his claws into the ground, picturing himself crouched in front of a bulky warrior, whimpering in pain before suddenly launching forward and scratching at his opponent's face, growling in anger.

"I like the fire in your eyes," Hazelfur continued, walking over to him. "You'll be a good warrior one day."

One day. He focused on those words. His darker thoughts yowled, *you're already a great warrior!* but he was smart enough to know that wasn't true. No matter how much he wanted to believe watching warriors and apprentices train every day for moons would help him, they only gave him the movements he should use, not real practice.

Rowanpaw turned his head and watched with hard eyes as Aspenheart stood up from beside Rohan and padded towards Emberheart, dipping her head as she approached. Rowanpaw and Hazelfur quietly slipped over to their Clanmates, silently agreeing their training could wait. As the young tom settled down next to his mentor, the she-cat stared up at Aspenheart.

"What do you need?" Her mew was cold.

Aspenheart swallowed but stood her ground despite the hint of fear in her eyes. "I wanted to know if Bloomcloud's litter had died. Carpkit, Frondkit, and Sparkkit?"

Rowanpaw felt his fur spike, his throat going dry as his mind was rushed with memories. He could remember watching from the medicine cat's den as his Clan mourned the loss of his best friend, her fur spiked with frost and her yellow eyes dull and clouded. He could still feel the flare of guilt in his heart, knowing he had gotten her killed. He had been the cause of his best friend's death, and he would never forgive himself for that.

"Carppaw and Frondpaw are fine, but Sparkkit died four moons ago," Birchsplash said after Emberheart refused to say anything.

Asprenheart's eyes softened with sadness, but Rowanpaw knew it had to be fake. "Starvation?" she asked.

"Cold," Birchsplash answered, shaking his head softly. "She and..." His eyes flickered to Rowanpaw for a moment. "She and two other kits went out during a storm and got lost. She was injured and they took shelter in a hollow log, but she didn't make it." He looked at his paws, clearly feeling the burning stare from Rowanpaw as the apprentice dug his claws into the ground.

Aspenheart turned her head to Rowanpaw. "You were with her?" she asked quietly. When Rowanpaw's eyes narrowed into slits, she added, "I know there couldn't be any more litters than three at the time, even that's a lot of kits for our-*your* Clan. I'm sorry you couldn't save her."

A small growl started in the apprentice's throat. "Don't talk to me like you understand. You abandoned all your rights to say 'our Clan' when you left to hide away. You're weak, and you're a coward. You don't deserve a Clan name." He wanted to get up and leave, but Emberheart's tail curling over his back made him stay still, though his muscles were tense and strained.

Aspenheart looked at him with watery eyes. "You're right," she said quietly, surprising Rowanpaw slightly, but he didn't show it. "I left BatClan when they needed me because I was scared to watch my friends and family starve. I know it was the wrong decision, and if I do it again I don't know what I'd choose. If I didn't, I would get to watch two, maybe three, of my kits grow up. If I did, I would get to find my mate again, and have another litter." She cast her gaze back to Rohan, where he sat in front of the bush that his kits were still hiding in. She turned back to the apprentice after a moment. "I wish I could still help my Clan."

"Well it's too late," he hissed with flattened ears. "It's *not* your Clan anymore."

Dropping her head, Aspenheart turned and padded away, tail down, and softly laid down next to her mate. He licked her cheek then glared across the clearing, his gaze burning into Rowanpaw's but the young cat stared back with the same loathing gaze.

"They're helping us, Rowanpaw, you need to be nice," Emberheart murmured in his ear, but he growled in response.

"We don't need their help! There's nothing here for us-the only thing we need to do is go back and help our Clan!" His fur began to bristle and he stared at his mentor with a challenging gaze.

"He's right," Hazelfur meowed softly, causing both her littermates to look at her in surprise.

"But we haven't found something to help us!" Birchsplash protested.

"And we never will," Hazelfur replied sadly, shaking her head. "Rohan has lived here all his life and this is the only place he has found. The only thing to do is to go back and help hunt."

Birchsplash looked at his paws, while Emberheart's eyes traveled to her side. They sat there in silence for what seemed like moons before the quiet air was broken by Hickory, Rain, and Copper racing into the garden, fear flooding from their coats, along with the smell of fresh blood. They skidded to a stop, revealing ruffled, bloody fur.

"What happened?" Rohan bounded across the clearing.

Hickory was struggling to breathe, but he took a deep breath and gasped, "they attacked us! We had prey and when we saw them we dropped it all, but they still came after us! We lost them around a corner, but I think they're coming here." His eyes were wide with terror.

"What are we going to do?" Wish cried, and Copper instantly went over and pressed against her, murmuring in her ear. Rain slipped away across the clearing to Aspenheart and the bramble bush the kits were hiding in, calling into the depts to ask the kits if they were okay. They responded with scared mewls.

"Quickly, get in the den, to the back room!" Rohan raced back to his kits, calling them out with a sharp meow, and he grabbed Fern by her scruff, ignoring her terrified squeal, and he hurried for the den, but only got halfway through the garden before hearing a high-

pitched shrill yowl. A moment later, a creature appeared.

It had long, skinny black legs with a lean body covered with short bright ginger fur. Its face was narrow with a long white muzzle, dark eyes glaring across the clearing. Its tail was long and fluffy, brushing the ground as it walked into the garden. Another fox followed, then another, and another. But no more came. The foxes stood there, looking around the area, while the cats stayed completely still.

Fern was still in her father's jaws, though she was so big her haunches were on the ground, her eyes twisted with pain. But she stayed silent. That is until Rohan tried to take a step back, and the lead fox took a few steps forward; that's when the kit let out a terrified cry. Rohan dropped her instantly and stood in front of her, curling his spine and letting out a growl of warning.

Hickory, Aspenheart, Copper, Rain, Birchsplash, and Hazelfur all moved toward him, creating a line of defense in front of the bramble bush. Emberheart tried to go forward, but Hazelfur hissed, "you're not fighting!" though Wish had to drag her back, and they stood right in front of the kits. But, Fern was still crouched behind Rohan's legs when the foxes launched forward.

As the cats stood their ground, Rowanpaw threw himself forward, gripping Fern's scruff in his teeth. He rolled away, getting the small kit out of the way just a heartbeat before Rohan was tackled by one of the foxes. He raced the kit back to the bramble bush and shoved her under fiercely, then he whipped around and tracked the position of everyone in the garden.

Rohan and Aspenheart were fighting against the lead fox, slashing with matching blows; Rain and Copper were running circles around another, leading it across the clearing to clear it from the rest of the fighting; Birchsplash and Hickory were attacking the third fox from both sides, causing it to whip around in confusion and anger; while Hazelfur faced the fourth fox alone.

Growling fiercely, Rowanpaw raced forward to Hazelfur's aid. The she-cat noticed him and leaped away from the fox, guiding it so it's back was to Rowanpaw. It launched its muzzle forward to snap at

her, but she slashed at its nose. It recoiled in shock, but before it could try to go forward again Rowanpaw leaped onto its back, digging his claws into its skin. He gripped its scruff in his teeth and shook his head until it hurt.

The fox screeched its ear-piercing cry, leaping around in crazed circles as it tried to get him off. The shock of the movements caused the young apprentice to fall away. A terrible, flaring pain went through his side as the fox bit down on his flank. He screeched in agony and lashed with his paws, but the fox barely even noticed the mark he made on its neck.

Hazelfur launched herself onto its neck, tearing it away from Rowanpaw and forcing it to fall on the ground. Rowanpaw tried to stand, but the flaring pain didn't let him rise. He watched helplessly from the ground as Hazelfur skillfully leaped over the fox's side, it's fur still in her mouth. It twisted around from her jump and caused the creature to screech in pain. It struggled free and snapped at her, but she managed to leap away. It snapped again and dug its teeth into her tail.

Rowanpaw winched in pain, able to feel the pain the she-cat must, but he was shocked how she was barely even fazed. She whipped her tail free and slashed her claws over its eye. It cried out, tucking it's face down to the ground while wiping a paw over it, and Hazelfur took the chance to sink her teeth into its leg. It squealed like a kit and shot off, holding it's leg up at an awkward angle. It hurried to leave the garden through the den, but Hazelfur raced after it, launching onto it's back to teach it a last lesson.

They disappeared into the den, and Rowanpaw wanted to try to follow, but when he tried to move the pain in his flank flared again. He searched the clearing for Emberheart and saw her impatiently picking at the grass with her claws, watching Birchsplash as he fought by Hickory's side at one of the fox's, slowly backing it toward the Twoleg den.

We're winning! he thought, excitement making his pain fade, but then he saw something that made his heart skip a beat. Rain and Copper weren't winning their fight; they were being backed toward the far back corner of the garden, Rain limping heavily with blood

covering one side of her face. Her haunches pressed against some ferns, and she turned to look where she was, the fox broke away from Copper trying to distract it, and made a straight line for the she-cat.

It's muzzle opened wide, blood-stained teeth shining as it went for a deadly bite. Rain frantically backed away, but it only caused her to get caught in her ferns. Rowanpaw knew there was no chance for the she-cat to get away. The fox was going to kill her. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. He tried to get to his paws, but even in the slowed time, the pain was too much to handle; he was too weak to do anything.

The fox was a moment from killing the she-cat, looming over her in a leap. But then, Copper was there. He threw himself in front of the fox, taking the bite aimed for Rain on his neck. Rowanpaw could hear his gurgling cry as the fox bit down, throwing him to the ground and shaking its head back and forth. For a few heartbeats, Copper continued trying to fight, but soon his body fell limp. The fox kept shaking around his body for a moment before letting it drop to the ground.

Copper had died to protect Rain, but the she-cat was still in the same place, frozen in shock and staring at Copper's limp body. Her terrified eyes flickered to the fox's, and it attacked. As it grabbed her back and dragged it closer, the soft she-cat Wish appeared, seeming to finally notice the attack. Rowanpaw wondered where Emberheart was, then he felt her body above his, protecting him.

Wish let out a screech of fury and attacked the fox's side, scratching at its flank with a cry in her throat. Hazelfur appeared too, followed by Hickory and then Birchsplash. Rowanpaw saw Rohan and Aspenheart send away their fox, then they turned and stared with wide eyes at Copper's limp frame. Birchsplash and Hickory sent the last fox running away with a shrill cry.

The cats stayed in silence for a few moments, then Rohan launched towards where Copper lay. Rowanpaw, his heart heavy with guilt for not being able to help, ignored the flaring pain in his body and tried desperately to get to his paws.

"Rowanpaw, stay still," Emberheart meowed fiercely, trying to nudge him still, but he ignored her. He limped unsteadily over, and Emberheart pressed against him, helping him walk over.

"He's gone..." Rohan's head was low over Copper's bloody pelt, his ears flat and tail low. Wish let out a strangled cry and collapsed onto the tom's body, letting out a yowl of sadness.

"He promised me!" Wish cried out, her head tucked into the tom's blood-wet stomach. "He promised me he wouldn't leave me!" She drew her head back and nudged his muzzle with her nose. She let out a sorrowful sound from deep in her throat when he didn't respond. "I can't lose both my brothers..."

Her littermate... Rowanpaw had been wondering how the two knew each other; it was clearly something close.

"Cop...Copper..." Rain limped forward from the fern bush. Thick rushes of blood was coming from her back, with her eyes dull and weak. She gently put her nose to his flank. "Thank you, for saving me..." She looked at Wish with sad eyes and murmured, "I promise to tell your story to my kits."

Hickory stumbled forward quickly, a thick bleeding scratch marking his muzzle clearly. "We're having kits?" he murmured.

The silver tabby looked at him and gave a small nod, the smallest gleam in her eyes despite her sadness. Hickory let out a soft mew, then pressed against the she-cat, taking her weight, and she instantly dropped onto his side, letting out a gasp of relief. "You shouldn't have fought," he murmured, giving her face a lick.

"We needed at least two cats to fight each fox. Wish has never been a fighter, and she's closer to kitting than I am." She nodded over to Emberheart, who flattened her ears and looked away, embarrassed and saddened she hadn't been able to help.

"It was still stupid to fight," Hickory whispered, rubbing his cheek against her's. The she-cat let out a soft purr, then gave a heavy cough. Rowanpaw winced in fear when he saw blood spatter out from her mouth. Slowly, she lowered herself to the ground with the

help of Hickory. "Wish, please, help!" The black tom looked at the ginger she-cat.

Wish slowly took her head from Copper's side, eyes filled with grief, but it began to clear when she saw Rain, with blood dribbling down her chin. On unsteady paws, Wish stumbled to the pool of water and stuck her muzzle close to a plant low to the ground, coming out with bright yellow and orange flowers in her jaws. She went back to Rain and crouched down next to her.

"Aspenheart, will you please go get me cobwebs from inside the Twoleg den? Hurry please!" Wish meowed quickly, and the she-cat launched off, even though she was bleeding heavily from many scratches along her body. "Rohan, will you get your kits to help her? I want Aspenheart to get as many cobwebs as possible and bring them back through them. I want Fern to come to me, though, please."

"Of course." The dark tabby dipped his head before hurrying off to the bramble bush. Feeling weak from the pain in his side, Rowanpaw limped closer to Copper's limp body and crouched down not far from Wish and Rain.

He watched as Wish licked at Rain's wounds with soft, slow strokes of her tongue. Rowanpaw was impressed she didn't wince as she cleaned the wound, the other cat's blood soaking her tongue.

I should probably do that, Rowanpaw thought, turning his head to look at the bite mark separating his fur. It hurt to turn closer to it, and when he touched his tongue to his open skin he hissed in pain, teeth clenched.

He looked up when Emberheart approached. With soft eyes, she lay down softly next to him and softly began to clean his wound. Pain flared through him and he dug his claws into the ground. He saw a scratch mark on his mentor's neck and decided to distract himself by beginning to clean it.

Since his side wound was much bigger than Emberheart's neck one, Rowanpaw soon finished. He couldn't get to any of her other scratches and cuts, so he instead began to clean the blood from her

pale coat. It didn't even seem weird, to be licking clean the thick fluid, thought the taste was warm and metallic. The smell made his scent glands hurt, but he ignored it, knowing Emberheart and Wish probably felt the same.

After a while of quiet licking and cleaning, Emberheart drew her head away. Rowanpaw looked at his side and saw that his wound was barely bleeding anymore, but the raw flesh burned when the wind brushed his fur against it.

He looked over to check on Rain and saw that Wish was pressing cobwebs to her side. They were a dark red and leaking blood on the she-cat's paws. Meadow appeared next to Fern, who was sitting and watching with anxious eyes. Meadow's fur was sticky from a clump of cobwebs on her back.

"Hold these right here." Wish used one paw to lead Fern's small ones and put them against the red cobwebs on Rain's side. The little she-cat didn't even flinch and sat there with a hard, calm gaze.

Wish quickly took the cobwebs from Meadow's coat and packed them together with her paws. She nodded to Fern and the she-kit silently took her paws away, with the old cobwebs still with her.

Rowanpaw could see a steady rush of blood coming from the wound, but it was covered by the new cobwebs. "Fern, chew that marigold into a pulp please," Wish meowed.

The small kit instantly began plucking petals from the yellow and orange flowers with her teeth, getting a large amount before beginning to chew like she had a stringy piece of a mouse in her jaws. Wish had Fern switch places with her so the kit could hold the cobwebs while Wish cleaned her paws in the water. She went back, keeping one front paw off the ground, and moved close to Rain, who was beginning to breathe heavily as she lay in grass soaked with her own blood. Hickory stayed by her face and covered it with licks.

"Give me the marigold pulp, please." Wish held a paw in front of Fern's muzzle, and the she-kit spat a disgusting wad of strong smelling chewed leaves onto the older cat's pad. She nodded, and

Fern removed the cobwebs. Wish began to rub the pulp into Rain's wound, causing the she-cat to hiss in pain, but she didn't make any more complaints. Rowanpaw thought it was rather incredible the she-cat could think clearly with her brother lying dead not far from her paws while knowing how to put the herbs on the wound correctly.

As Primrose returned with cobwebs sticking to her pelt, Wish took them silently and stretched them out over the wound, carefully tying it into her fur to cover the raw, open flesh. Rowanpaw felt another pain through his side, and he growled heavily in pain. Wish looked over, and spoke quietly to Rain before padding over with some leftover cobwebs and marigold flowers. Emberheart moved out of the way and let Rain crouch down.

Rowanpaw thought about telling the older she-cat to help Hazelfur and Birchsplash first, or the other garden cats, but the pain in his side flared again, forcing him to stay quiet as she chewed up the marigold then slowly began to rub it into the wound. She finished up and covered it with cobwebs soon enough. "Now leave it alone," she meowed softly, picking up her herbs and heading through the cats quietly.

Rowanpaw blinked after her, then looked over at Copper's body. He forced himself to his paws and padded over, sitting down with a wince of pain. He opened his mouth to speak out loud but then decided to speak inside his head. *I don't know a lot about you, but I'm sorry you're gone. I'm sure you could've been a great warrior if you were born in a Clan.*

"Wish, will you come over here? We need to talk about something!" Rohan walked over to Rain and Hickory with Aspenheart at his side. Staring at his "parents" with cold eyes, the apprentice got up and went over to Emberheart, settling down by her side and resting his head on his paws. He watched the garden cats gather close to Copper, giving his pelt a soft lick as they spoke softly. Rohan started talking about something that made the cats around him cast quick glances at Rowanpaw's Clanmates.

He was impatient to know what they were talking about, but he stayed where he was, lashing his tail and watching them with hard

eyes. Finally, they slowly came over, though Wish stayed back to work more on Rain's wounds. Hickory looked upset to be leaving her but followed Rohan over either way.

Rowanpaw raised his head in interest as the cats stopped in front of him, while Emberheart, Hazelfur, and Birchsplash faced them, all sitting down. Rohan and his cats followed in suit. "We can't live here anymore," Rohan meowed after a few heartbeats. "We've never been so low on cats before, and with Copper... *gone* and Rain hurt and expecting kits... We don't have enough cats to keep us going."

"What are you saying?" Birchsplash meowed, looking nervously at his sisters.

"We can't survive here anymore," Rohan meowed. "You said you all came here looking for something to help your Clan; Aspenheart can't stop thinking about her first litter; we can't stay here anymore. So I talked to my cats and decided to ask you..." He looked at his mate and Hickory before letting out a breath and turning to the Clan warriors. "We want to join you on your journey home, and help hunt for your Clan. Help you through the cold season."

Rowanpaw wanted to laugh, to call Rohan out on how stupid he was to think they would let him come back with them, but he stayed quiet and waited for Birchsplash to decline. "Let us think about your offer," Birchsplash meowed slowly.

What? Anger and disbelief flared through Rowanpaw. He tensed and dug his claws into the ground, not even noticing the pain in his side. How could Birchsplash even think about letting them come back? Aspenheart had chosen to leave the Clan; she couldn't come back now!

"We will let you speak." Rohan gave a small dip of his head then walked back to Copper, crouching down by the tom's dull body and resting his head on his paws.

"What do you think?" Birchsplash looked at his littermates.

"I hate the idea of letting outsiders into our Clan," Hazelfur began, "especially Aspenheart. But we need more cats to help hunt. These

cats know how to hunt in the Twoleg Place, so they could be the patrol we send in here to find prey. The main reason we can't get prey is because we're too weak to chase the few mice and birds we find. These cats have more strength, so they would help us get stronger. They would be useful."

"I think Dawnstar would allow them to join," Emberheart meowed slowly, clearly thinking closely about her answer. "We need more warriors; we have too many kits for leaf-bare coming up. Both Ashbreeze and I with a litter of kits? Our current warriors couldn't handle that. Aspenheart doesn't really deserve to come back, but her three kits will be able to become apprentices in newleaf--that means even more warriors."

"What about you, Rowanpaw?" Birchsplash looked over at him. "You may be an apprentice, but you deserve to have a vote, too. Put your personal feelings inside; pretend these cats aren't your kin, aren't from your past--would you choose to let them join us?"

Never! he wanted to say, but he knew that was a lie. If he really didn't know these cats like he did, he would let them join. For Emberheart, and Ashbreeze; these cats could take care of their kits, keep them alive. "They could help us through leaf-bare... And it means more warriors for the fight against EchoClan." He kept his eyes at his paws, feeling a rush of anger that he was agreeing to bring these cats along. He liked Primrose and Fern and Meadow, they were his sisters, but he didn't want Aspenheart to come with them.

"Rowanpaw," Emberheart meowed softly, "If Aspenheart comes with us, you know you'll have to tell her about who you are, right?" Her eyes were scared for him.

"I know." He had known since the moment he saw Aspenheart. He wanted to confront her about why she left as a stranger then as her son, to see how she would change her act. What lies would she pull in an attempt to make him listen? He was glad he had gotten to tell the she-cat that he and Blazepaw hated her, so she wouldn't think they would drop at her paws when they saw her.

"Then it's decided for now," Birchsplash sighed. "They will join us to

our camp, then Dawnstar can decide whether to let them join or make them leave."

Emberheart and Hazelfur nodded in agreement, while Rowanpaw turned his eyes across the garden and let it burn onto Aspenheart's pelt. The she-cat seemed to sense his gaze and turned to look at him, bright amber eyes wide with curiosity. Rowanpaw didn't turn his eyes away, and he felt a flash of satisfaction when she looked away. She would realize soon who he was, and what she had done to him. She hadn't even recognized him; how could a mother stare right into her kit's eyes but not realize who they were?

Question #1: What are your thoughts of the Twoleg garden cats planning on joining the Clan?

Question #2: Do you think Dawnstar will let the garden cats join them, or will she send them away?

Question #3: How do you think Aspenheart will react when she finds out Rowanpaw is her son?

Question #4(so many questions!): How do you think *Rohan* will react when he finds out Rowanpaw is his son?

Chapter Twenty

"Foxpounce, take Frostfall, Featherpaw, and Firepaw to patrol the moorland border. Oakcloud, I want you to take Brightpaw, Stonecoat, and Shadefur to the forest border and along the Old Thunderpath until the river, once they get back. Maskdapple, you, Silverstrike, Boulderclaw, and I will go check on the dead Twoleg then finish off the Thunderpath border. Russetdawn, you take Pebblepeak and Grayblaze out hunting; go easy though, Grayblaze, I won't deal with your injured leg again! Understood?" Eagleclaw stood on the Rock Pile and looked over the crowd of warriors around her.

Ravenpaw was lying in front of the apprentices' den, sharing tongues with his brother, but he paused when Jaypaw's body tensed in envy. Ravenpaw followed his gaze to Foxpounce leading his patrol out of camp. Of course he was jealous of them; he was still in punishment for going to see the Twoleg. He hadn't been training for many days now.

"I'm so bored!" Jaypaw groaned and collapsed onto his side, sighing dramatically. Ravenpaw prodded his side with amusement, and his brother jumped up with a laugh. "I'm serious, though! I need something to do besides gathering moss! Look at my poor claws!" He displayed them to Ravenpaw and revealed dull claws with moss stuck inside of them. Ravenpaw noticed a small thorn stuck inside his brother's tough pad.

"When did that happen?" he asked, touching it softly with his nose, and Jaypaw pulled it back quickly with a mewl of pain.

"Ow! Watch it!" he grumbled, then added, "it happened earlier today when I was coming back from gathering moss."

"Come to the medicine cats' den, Mossrain needs to get that out." Ravenpaw was happy he could show his new skills to his brother.

"No way! I'm fine!" Jaypaw shuffled away.

"Hey, you're not allowed to argue! I'm your medicine cat!" He remembered Mossrain talking to him about him being too afraid to tell Grayblaze not to use his paw just three days before; even though he was a brand new apprentice, even senior warriors had to listen if he had medical advice. If he thought a cat was injured, it was required for Mossrain or Goldenpool to check them over quickly. Of course, Ravenpaw would never tell a cat they needed to be checked over except his own brother.

"Medicine cat *apprentice*," Jaypaw teased, getting to his paws and holding his injured pad up. Ravenpaw pawed at his whiskers playfully before bouncing away. Jaypaw mewled in anger as his brother skipped around him happily. Jaypaw raised onto his back legs and tried to swipe with his uninjured front paw, but his brother managed to jump away.

They made a slow way across the clearing, playing like they were kits again until they reached the medicine cats' den and calmed down enough to walk in. Ravenpaw was enveloped by all the different scents of herbs, and he felt instantly calmed. "Hey Mossrain, Jaypaw got a thorn stuck in his paw!"

The young tom looked over. "Great!" His tail flicked excitedly and hurried over.

"What?" Jaypaw looked scared. "Why is that great?"

"Because I've been waiting for some cat to get a thorn in their pad to teach Ravenpaw! It's taken quite a while with how many apprentices we have!" He gave a chuckle and sat down in front of the two apprentices. Jaypaw hesitantly held his paw out for the older cat to look at. "It's been stuck pretty deep from you stepping on it; I'm surprised you're not mewling in agony!" Mossrain flicked his tail. "It doesn't seem to be infected. See the edges of the wound, Ravenpaw?" Mossrain pointed with a single claw. "If it was infected there would be puss around it, and the pad would be swelling." Jaypaw looked disgusted.

Ravenpaw nodded quickly. "It looks a little swollen, though," he

pointed out.

"Good eye," Mossrain praised. "Will you grab me a few cobwebs?" his mentor asked. Nodding, the black-furred apprentice turned away and went to the herb storage, putting his weight on his hind legs while he put his front paws on the stone wall. He slowly pushed himself up, stretching out his long body as far as he could to the top crevice, where a large bundle of cobwebs was stored. He stuck one paw in and cupped some cobwebs, then brought them out to look at. They looked nice and clean, so he dropped down.

He had to hold up the paw with cobwebs on it, so he couldn't stay stable and fell onto his side. Embarrassment burned through him, and he mewled quietly with ears down, licking his chest fur.

Mossrain broke out laughing, tail flicking around in his excitement. "Don't worry, Ravenpaw, that's happened to me more times than I can remember! A few moons ago, Petalpaw got stuck in a thorn bush and scratched the living StarClan out of his pelt! I went to get some cobwebs while chewing up goldenrod and I fell down! Oh, Petalpaw thought it was so funny! It was okay because it distracted him from his pain. Though my back wasn't too happy with me." The tom curled his spine at the memory, wincing from the old pain that had faded away long ago.

"Not to be rude and all, but this thorn still kinda hurts," Jaypaw meowed when Mossrain quieted for a moment. The gray tom let out a meow of surprise.

"Sorry, Jaypaw, got caught up in old thoughts! Ravenpaw, come help me with this." Mossrain took Jaypaw's paw again and had the young apprentice hold it out so the pad was facing upwards. "Jaypaw, let's clean up your paw in the water first, okay?" He led the two apprentices over to the small pool in between the herbs and the moss storage. Ravenpaw still had the cobwebs, so he set them down to the side and moved forward to watch with eyes shining in interest.

Ravenpaw watched silently as Mossrain directed Jaypaw to stick his injured pad into the water, but he drew it back with a surprised mewl. "That stings!" he complained.

"I'm not surprised!" Mossrain replied with great energy, then made the apprentice put his paw back in. The white and gray tom shot his brother a scared and pained look. Ravenpaw couldn't help but laugh, and he saw a gleam of happiness in Jaypaw's gaze; the medicine cat apprentice was happy he had brightened his brother's mood like Mossrain had brightened Petalpaw's; at least he hadn't hurt himself in order to brighten his littermate.

After soaking his pad for a few moments, Mossrain allowed Jaypaw to pull it out and took a close look. With the back of his claw, Mossrain pressed down on the young cat's swollen pad. Jaypaw mewled in a complaint but tried to keep his paw still, a pained growl in his throat. *Is he okay?* Ravenpaw wasn't sure if he could put a cat through this pain to see if they were hurt. Hurting to heal? It didn't make sense.

"Don't look so sad, Ravenpaw, we don't do this with every thorn. Only if the pad is swollen. And this is why." Mossrain pointed with a claw at the thorn. "See that yellow stuff coming out around it? That's puss, an infection. We need to clean that up before it gets worse. Burdock root, chervil leaves, horsetail, and marigold are the herbs to use with infections. We'll use chervil leaves since that's what we have the most of. They're near the bottom of the storage, some sweet smelling leaves that kinda look like ferns if you don't remember."

Nodding, Ravenpaw hurried off and sniffed around the store, taking in all the different scents until he found what he was looking for. He grabbed some and quickly brought them back to his mentor. "Are these right?" he asked hopefully.

"Yup! Good job, Ravenpaw!" Mossrain meowed happily. "Let's try to clear some the infection before we take out the thorn." Mossrain reached over and grabbed the cobwebs carefully with his claws, pressing them against the pad around the thorn, trying not to touch it the best he could. Jaypaw mewled in pain, his tail flicking. Ravenpaw gave his ear a brotherly lick to comfort him. It seemed to help a bit. "All right, let's take the thorn out now."

Ravenpaw looked over and then hurried to sit next to his mentor, staring intently at Jaypaw's paw, almost like he expected the thorn

to come out without touching it. "Will it hurt?" he asked his mentor, and Jaypaw looked scared at the thought of more pain.

"Only for a moment," Mossrain promised the apprentices. "Okay, Ravenpaw, try not to grab his pad when you do this. Use your teeth to grip the thorn; once you know you have a good grip, tug hard and straight back, so you don't hurt him more than he was before. Jaypaw, keep your paw still, or it'll hurt like a claw to the eye. If you're going to be a warrior, you need to be used to pain."

"Foxpounce says in the heat of battle you don't feel your wounds," Jaypaw mumbled grumpily.

"The distraction of battle will help, but you will still feel those scratches, trust me. I've dealt with more battle wounds than I can remember, and I'm still a new medicine cat. Don't let that stop you, though," Mossrain added when Jaypaw looked terrified. "Even when I treat their wounds, warriors and apprentices just talk and talk about how amazing it was to feel the blaze of the battle, to protect the Clanmates that can't protect themselves. Especially with young kits in the Clan—even with a small border skirmish, you feel alive with the thrill of protecting those tiny little kits that don't know where they are; knowing you're protecting warriors who've become too old to fight for themselves."

"You sound like you know what you're talking about," Jaypaw meowed softly. "How do you know what it's like to be a warrior when you've been a medicine cat all your life?"

"Well, I treat warriors every day for all different kinds of things, so I talk to them to distract them from the pain they feel. Remember my parents and my littermate are warriors, as well. Maskdapple is the oldest warrior in the Clan, besides Acornstar, so she has plenty of stories to tell. Did you know Maskdapple was actually Acornstar's first apprentice? It's quite a story, you know. Acornstar—Acorntail back then I believe—was a rather young warrior but was a very good hunter all the same. But she was very hot-headed, quite a match for Maskdapple! I believe that's why Dovestar chose her. You two have heard of Dovestar, haven't you? A great leader, really, she was Branchstar's deputy. You have heard of Branchstar, surely?" he added when the young apprentices looked confused.

"Can we please get this thorn out of my paw?" Jaypaw cut in before Mossrain could continue farther into his stories.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Jaypaw!" Mossrain shook his head to clear his mind. "All right, Ravenpaw, as I said before, gently grip the thorn in your teeth and make sure you have a good hold, then take it out quickly. Try not to move it around; we don't want to hurt the pad anymore. And make sure you don't bite down too far, you could get the puss in your mouth—which is okay for your health, you can wash it out easily—or press on his paw. Ready? Take your time."

Ravenpaw swallowed, his throat suddenly dry, and he wished Mossrain would cut him off to start up the story about Branchstar again, which did sound interesting to hear about. He remembered maybe hearing the name before, but he wasn't too sure. Swiping his tongue over his muzzle, Ravenpaw nodded softly to his brother and waited for one back before leaning forward slowly. He eyed the thorn before carefully opening his jaws, using his whiskers to tell how close he was to the pad.

Ravenpaw gently and slowly closed his teeth together, but he didn't feel the thorn. He went closer, hearing Jaypaw mewl in pain, but he tried his best to ignore it and finally wrapped his teeth around thorn. He waited a moment, calming his heartbeat, then suddenly jerked his head back as straight as he could. Jaypaw let out a loud *mrrow* on pain and jumped back, mewling like a kit.

Ravenpaw dropped the thorn onto some of the leftover cobwebs, deciding he didn't want it falling on the ground for another cat to step in. Quickly, he stuck his muzzle in the water, feeling he had to wash the inside of his mouth thoroughly in case some of the puss infection had gotten into his mouth. Mossrain laughed, flicking Ravenpaw's back with his tail.

"Jaypaw, let me have your paw again," Mossrain meowed, and Ravenpaw looked over to see Mossrain taking the thorn from the cobwebs then using them to touch at his brother's pad. Jaypaw seemed to be in pain, but stayed quiet about it, though his tail was thrashing around, showing that he wanted to get away.

Ravenpaw watched as his mentor reached over and grabbed the

chervil leaves from the ground and chewed it into a pulp while still cleaning the small wound, though soon he took away the cobwebs and spit out the pulp onto Jaypaw's pad. The apprentice mewled in either disgust or pain, turning his head away with flattened ears with a curled muzzle. Mossrain let out another laugh before using cobwebs to press the pulp deeper into the wound.

"You see how I'm doing it? Since there's an infection, we can't use our tongue to help clear it away. If there's no infection, then we'd just let the injured cat lick their paw and have them stay off it while it heals. But since there's an infection in the pad, we can't rub the herb pulp into it, so we have to use cobwebs. It does take some of the pulp back and it might hurt the wound if it touches it too much and sticks then it'll be like a claw digging into it. You need a steady paw to keep it safe. Jaypaw, go ahead and head back to your den, but keep your paw off the ground. I'm ordering you to take a break from using your paw until tomorrow when you'll come to check with me at sunhigh, then I'll decide when you can get back to work."

"Does this mean I get a break from gathering moss?" Jaypaw looked hopeful despite having to hold his paw at an awkward angle as Mossrain spread cobwebs over it carefully.

Mossrain purred, "until I say so, yes." The gray and white apprentice's eyes glowed with blazing excitement.

"You've barely been an apprentice for half a moon, Jaypaw, you can't be tired already!" Ravenpaw let out a *mrrow* of amusement and flicked his tail. His brother flattened his ears playfully.

"Same as you!" His eyes glowed with a sibling challenge.

Ravenpaw gave a playful growl, dropping into a crouch and wiggling his haunches. He was ready to launch forward, but Mossrain's tail drifted in front of his muzzle, making the medicine cat apprentice loosen his muscles and sit up, scooting his paws close to his chest.

"Your littermate needs to rest his paw. How about instead of playing, you go see Dappletail? I'm sure she's been quite lowly

recently, and she'd love to tell you two some stories. You could ask about Branchstar and Dovestar, she'll know much more than I do. Without any denmates, I bet she would love to talk. Flamepaw isn't too talkative, so I'm sure he's upsetting to tell stories to." Mossrain's eyes glowed with memories, maybe of his own kithood.

"So I'm excused from medicine cat duties?" Ravenpaw mewed hopefully. In the past three days, Mossrain had been working him tirelessly, trying to get his mind off wanting to rid himself of his power; when he had told Mossrain, the tom had become extremely upset at the idea.

"If I had the opportunity to have powers like yours, I would never give them up. I know it can be scary to see things that you shouldn't, but you can save so many cats from pain and loss by just touching a single cat's nose. This power could save our Clan from destruction."

He had denied Ravenpaw's request to go to the Moonstream, saying he needed more time to make a decision as important as this one. He had been keeping his apprentice busy, constantly working on becoming a better medicine cat, but it seemed the tom had finally decided to allow the younger cat a break.

"Just to listen to some stories for today; I need to talk to Goldenpool." Mossrain's eyes clearly showed he wanted to say more, but Ravenpaw didn't need him too. His mentor was going to talk with the other medicine cat about him, Ravenpaw—about his power, about trying to convince him to keep it. If they knew he had seen the death of poor young Dustkit, they wouldn't make him keep this power, but he didn't have the heart to tell Goldenpool the only tom of her first litter—and maybe her last, if she did end up dying —might not make it to apprenticeship.

"'Bye, Mossrain! Come on Ravenpaw, before your *mossy* mentor changes his mind!" It was clear Jaypaw was going to say bossy, as he had many times before, but found the chance to play with the medicine cat's name. With narrowed eyes glowing with playfulness, Mossrain softly chased the apprentices from his den with an unthreatening growl.

Jaypaw and Ravenpaw scampered unsteadily from the den,

laughing quietly at and with each other as they went to the elders' den, slipping inside the bushes. The dull tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat Dappletail was lying in her nest on her side, running a paw over her ear. She looked up as the apprentices entered, and her graying green eyes lit with pleasure.

"No herbs, Ravenpaw? Don't tell me Mossrain is letting you slack in your training!" her hoarse mew was full of amusement.

"He's let me enjoy some time with my littermate," Ravenpaw explained, flicking Jaypaw's flank with his tail. "Jaypaw's injured his pad, so we were hoping we could come for some stories." The two apprentices settled down near the elder, with Ravenpaw crouching on the empty spot Berrywhisker's nest had sat for many seasons before it was removed after her passing. A pang it Ravenpaw's heart, and he knew how much this visit would help Dappletail's spirit; she had grown up with Berrywhisker—they had been born at the same time, so they were kits, apprentices, warriors, and then finally elders together, for every day of their life. Berrywhisker was her best friend, the only other elder... She must feel so lonely now.

"Well, what story would you like to hear? I have a great one from my apprenticeship, my first time dealing with a fox! Or, when I scented my first badger as a warrior. Both interesting stories, especially for a training warrior." She nodded to Jaypaw with shining eyes. The apprentice looked excited and ready to agree to one of the stories, but Ravenpaw quickly interrupted his brother, interested in the old leaders of his Clan. He wondered if he asked Echo about them the stories would be the same?

"Mossrain started talking about Branchstar and Dovestar, can we hear about them?"

"Branchstar..." Dappletail's eyes glowed. "He'll forever be remembered through EchoClan. He was the one to expose Brookstar." She looked at them with surprise at their confused faces. "You two have heard of Brookstar, haven't you?"

The young apprentices shook their heads. Ravenpaw had heard the name a few names before; spoken with anger or disgust or by his

mother scolding his littermates as young kits. Dappletail sighed dramatically.

"Kits!" she gasped, rolling her eyes.

"*Apprentices!*" Jaypaw corrected. Dappletail looked at him with a playful disapproving glance.

"You should learn about Brookstar first, and her medicine cat, Firebreeze." Ravenpaw brightened for a moment, but then his eyes darkened in fear at the dire look in the elder's eyes; did Brookstar do something to her medicine cat? "Which would you like to hear first?"

"Brookstar!" Jaypaw mewled quickly, casting his brother a confident look, and Ravenpaw accepted to hear Brookstar's first.

"Well, she was a long-ago leader—Branchstar was her deputy—and did awful things to get her title. She was an amazing fighter, but she had a strong ambition; she desperately wanted to become the leader of EchoClan. She decided the easiest way was to kill her way up the ranks, killing a warrior who was suspected of becoming the next deputy, before killing the current deputy. She became deputy herself, but Brookstar—I think Brookclaw—had killed the two cats too soon after each other; the warrior Branchleap suspected something."

"Branchleap? Meaning Branchstar?" Jaypaw cut in excitedly, tail waving through the air. Dappletail gave an amused nod and continued with the story.

"He didn't say anything, but instead slowly got closer to Brookclaw, and the more he learned about her, the less he suspected her. Eventually, he fathered her kits. But she was still deputy and the previous leader, Rainstar, told Brookclaw he was planning on choosing a new deputy while she nursed her kits, but would allow her back into the position once they became warriors. But Rainstar had been getting older, and he was on his last life.

"Brookclaw knew she needed to stay deputy, so..." Dappletail looked disgusted, and she shook her head sadly and mewed, "so she killed

her kits. She suffocated them, made it seem they had died in the night. Then, just a few nights later, she secretly killed Rainstar, and took leadership. After her deputy died, she gave the position to her old mate. Branchleap had started to get suspicious again, and he set a trap and revealed her to their Clan as the monster she was. They were all outraged."

Dappletail silenced herself without warning and tiredly got to her paws, quietening Ravenpaw's complaint of her moving by a flick of her tail. She brushed out of the den with the apprentices following her out. She stared at the quiet clearing, the pale leaf-fall sun cool and dull over the grass.

"Right in front of the Rock Pile, her Clan—our Clan—attacked her as one. They tore her pelt from her bones." Dappletail limped over to the rocks, putting her nose close to the stone and sniffing along the cold rock. "I'm surprised her blood isn't still stained here."

"What about Firebreeze? Was he one of her victims?" Ravenpaw murmured scaredly, but despite his fear, he was desperate to learn about this past medicine cat.

A soft purr of amusement came from Dappletail's old throat. "Oh, if only. Firebreeze's mother died during his kitting, so he was suckled by Brookstar's mother. They grew up as close as littermates. Firebreeze became a medicine cat, he had a talent for it and loved the attention and recognition he received. And he fell in love with a she-cat, a name lost through the seasons of stories. But she didn't feel the same and became mates with someone else, and she had his kits. Firebreeze was angry that he didn't get what he wanted, so when his lost love's mate got injured, he put deathberries into his wound, and the tom slowly died from poisoning."

"Firebreeze killed a cat...?" Ravenpaw felt horror growing inside of him. Medicine cats healed, not killed! How could a medicine cat do that, not only murdering a cat, but a cat from their own Clan?

"Yes, but he didn't stop there," Dappletail sighed. "He didn't feel he had shown his old love how much she hurt him, so he took her kits out one day, saying he wanted to show them something. He brought them into the forest and killed them, letting them bleed out slowly.

Their mother found them dead in the forest, and Firebreeze confronted her, telling her everything before he killed her for a final punishment. But his killing frenzy had turned him crazy, and he didn't see he had done anything wrong when the patrol found him over the cats' bodies. Rainstar exiled him, and he was never seen again."

Ravenpaw stared silently at his paws. A medicine cat killed not only two warriors, but three kits? Was that what he was living up to? A murderer? He had wanted to be a medicine cat so bad, but now his mind was whirling. Goldenpool had been trained by a cat who would've been trained by Firebreeze himself or another cat trained by him, depending on how many medicine cats there had been after the killer. Did that mean he was being taught something Firebreeze had taught the past medicine cats? Did all his skills come from that murderer?

Without saying anything, Ravenpaw just quietly padded to the medicine cat's den, ignoring Jaypaw's worried call. He slipped into his den and slunk over to his nest, curling up with his back to the world, his face hidden in the moss.

"Ravenpaw? Are you okay?" Mossrain came over and he felt the older tom's breath ruffle his fur.

"I just want to be alone..." He hadn't even learned about Dovestar and Branchstar, the whole reason he had gone to see Dappletail, but he didn't even care anymore. He felt Mossrain sit close to him, dropping his tail over his apprentice's side.

"You learned of Firebreeze?" he questioned softly.

Ravenpaw let out a small mewl to confirm his mentor's question, his head still tucked away.

Mossrain let out a soft sigh, pawing the moss around his apprentice closer to the young tom. "Go ahead and rest, Ravenpaw." His mentor's warmth disappeared and soft pawsteps crossed the den and went into the clearing.

Ravenpaw stayed where he was, knowing he wouldn't be able to

sleep but also knowing he didn't want to face any cat at the moment. He just wanted to be alone, like he had told Mossrain. Letting out a sigh, Ravenpaw thought about his ability and what his choice would be.

Question #1: What do you think of Brookstar's story?

Question #2: What do you think of Firebreeze's story and the fact that he is a medicine cat but a murderer?

Chapter Twenty-One

Ravenpaw couldn't stay still. The cold still air told him it was night, along with the peaceful breathing from Mossrain that was occasionally broken by snores. His mind was whirling from the story of Firebreeze, a cat who promised to heal and protect his Clanmates but ended up killing them in cold blood.

Even though they weren't connected even the slightest bit, Ravenpaw's young mind was trying to convince him he wouldn't feel this way if not for his abilities, making him want to rid himself of the ability to see the future even more. But he knew he would end up regretting it if he was even able to. He knew that Mossrain would never allow him to rid himself of it. If he did it, he would have to do it without his mentor knowing.

But will I regret it? He would never get it back, he would never get to see the future of a cat's life, never get to see if Stormkit would be okay when she was older. If he hadn't been given this power, Stormkit would've died, and they wouldn't be ready to expect Goldenpool's strange injury. It was scary and scarring, but it *was* useful to the Clan—and that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to be useful to his Clan, to make a difference.

But he also wanted Blossompaw.

She wanted him to be normal, and she didn't even know about his power. She just meant him being a medicine cat. As they got older, she would realize her mistake, especially with Maskdapple training her, and maybe she would get over him being a medicine cat, but would she get over his ability? Did he want to help his Clan in a special way nobody else could while possibly seeing death, or did he want to be close to his littermate?

I want to help any cat any way I can, but I want Blossompaw again. He couldn't—or maybe wouldn't—decide what he wanted. He wanted to see his power more, to find out what he would see more, death,

injuries, or life. And he knew how he would decide whether he would keep his power or whether he wouldn't.

Quietly getting to his paws, Ravenpaw stretched out his back then padded from the den, his pads scraping against the stone floor. When he ventured into the clearing in a crouch, the moonlight reflected down onto his sleep-ruffled coat. He spied closely at both camp entrances and saw the lithe shining outline of his kin Silverstrike at the far moor entrance, while Russetdawn's scent came strongly from the closer forest entrance.

Licking his lips to wet his throat, the young apprentice slunk silently across the clearing, shooting quick glances at both camp entrances, and he managed to slip inside the apprentices' den unseen, as far as he knew. It was quite likely one of the guarding warriors had scented him, but they wouldn't see any harm of a familiar scent moving in the clearing. Unless they thought he was doing something bad, then one or maybe both of them would come to investigate. What if they came and accidentally woke the other apprentices? His plan would be ruined! His heart sped in fear, but he forced it to calm as he approached his sleeping littermates.

When he entered, he was immediately met with his littermates' nest to his left, while Featherpaw and her littermates slept in their own nest against the far wall, with Petalpaw and Brightpaw on the opposite back side. They all slept soundly, Firepaw's ragged breathing breaking the silence; he was most likely having a bad dream, with his legs twitching and his tail thrashing around. Flamepaw, still sleeping, sub-consciously rolled closer to his littermate, curling around his back and tucking his muzzle into Firepaw's neck fur. This seemed to calm the tom, for he slowly fell still.

Ravenpaw felt a pang of sadness, knowing he would never have that chance, to curl up and sleep with a littermate. If he really wanted to, he could ask Mossrain to sleep in the apprentices' den, but he still remembered on the first few nights of his apprenticeship, he had slept in this same den, but it was strange. There was no milky scent like that of the nursery, just the thick air from being underground and the stuffy scents of all the apprentices. He liked the smells from the herbs in the medicine cat's den, they

gave him comfort.

Though there was one thing he wanted back from sleeping with his littermates. On the first night, the hostility from Blossompaw had been overwhelming, and she had slept as far as possible, almost completely out of the nest. But when he awoke in the night, he had found his sister had actually come close when he had slept, though by morning she had moved back and acted it had never happened. He had yet to mention it yet—he wondered if he had imagined her fur brushing against his.

Flicking his ear to clear his thoughts, Ravenpaw went quietly to his littermates and looked over their sleeping forms. Jaypaw's head was the closest, so Ravenpaw softly leaned down and touched noses with his brother.

"Jaypaw!" The gray and white apprentice was in front of the nursery, working on thickening the walls to protect Goldenpool and her litter from the future leaf-bare winds. "I talked to Acornstar, and she agreed to let you go back to training early, though you're not allowed to do any battle practice until your time is up. You can only work on hunting right now."

"Great!" Ravenpaw could feel the absolute thrill rushing through his brother; he must absolutely love training, even though he had only had a few days of true apprenticeship before his punishment. Ravenpaw guessed this would be at most a few days from now—Jaypaw's punishment lasted for only half a moon, so there was only a quarter moon left. "Will Blossompaw get to train again, too?"

"No." His mentor's firm voice made the apprentice's shoulders sag, but he brightened as his mentor continued. "While your littermate did her chores, you were willing to help much more than she was, and you were always willing to work for your Clan with such boring duties, and you kept a good attitude."

"There's no shame in taking care of your Clan!" Jaypaw mewled excitedly, tail flicking, and Ravenpaw felt a flash of pride at being Jaypaw's littermate. One day, his brother would make a good warrior to this Clan. Perhaps he might be leader? Ravenpaw's young mind pictured he and his brother, leading the Clan together. Sudden anxiety shot

through him as he realized once again that when he was older after Mossrain and Goldenpool were gone, his leader would look to him for guidance and answers from their warrior ancestors.

Great StarClan, help me! *A part of him hoped he would never be alone as a medicine cat, and his heart raced at the idea of teaching his own apprentice everything they would need to become the next healer of their Clan. How would he ever learn everything about healing, much less teach it? This would be impossible!*

Ravenpaw barely even realized he had left the vision, and he shook his head, trying to clear himself of the bad thoughts. He had to focus! What did this vision tell him? *It was good, it showed me Jaypaw getting back into training, I can tell him to work even harder!* So far, it was nice. It was good. It was helpful.

But he still had a heavy heart when he leaned down and touched Willowpaw's twitching pink nose.

Willowpaw was standing on the SageClan border stream, lapping at the cold water with a soft tongue. Light snowfall littered her white coat, and she mewled with amusement as a flake landed on her nose. By the sight of her, she looked at least ten moons old, meaning leaf-bare was almost over. Her eyes shined bright with mischief, and she glanced over at Pebblepeak, who was sniffing at the ground beside the water.

Reaching a paw into the freezing river, she sent a large splash towards her mentor, soaking his tabby gray fur. He yowled in surprise and jumped into the air, twisting around to face his apprentice. "Willowpaw! That wasn't nice!" he grumbled, though kittish amusement was in his own gaze. He was still a kit himself, in some ways.

"Sorry!" she squeaked, flicking her tail, looking at her paws. But Pebblepeak was no longer looking at her. A SageClan patrol was bounding over their uneven moorland towards them. Pebblepeak flicked his tail to order Willowpaw closer to him, and she didn't complain as she slunk to his side.

He waited patiently for the patrol to come close, though something shined in his eyes when he saw one of the members of the patrol. It was a rather beautiful she-cat, with red-brown bushy fur that seemed to flare

like fire in the sunlight. She was skinny, like the two other members of her patrol. Their lean frames made them look small, though they still had long muscular legs.

"What are you doing on our border? Surely you could muster more cats for a simple border patrol!" The lead cat, a dark ginger tom, stood strongly before the two EchoClan cats. Pebblepeak had gotten over whatever had taken his mind when he saw the red she-cat, and he rolled his shoulders and fluffed his fur, allowing his muscular frame to show. A flash of fear went through the last patrol member's eyes. She was a young cream-colored she-cat that must've been a rather young warrior.

"Is there a reason we would need more cats? As you said, it's just a simple border patrol." Pebblepeak watched the other tom with hard eyes. A little behind, the red-brown she-cat watched Pebblepeak with weak eyes.

The tom snorted in amusement. "Watch your back, forest cat. You may not have it for long." He flicked his tail to order his cats to follow him.

Pebblepeak's eyes were flaring with anger as the cats slowly started away, but he forced his fur calm. "Take care," the young tom forcefully meowed. It was clear he was unhappy and wanted to show the older tom what he was made of, but he knew it wasn't a fight he would win, and rude words would just make everything worse. The red-brown she-cat paused, letting her Clanmates continue on while she looked back at Pebblepeak with a strange, worry-like gaze. "Willowpaw, I'll meet you back at camp." He flicked his tail as an order for his apprentice to leave.

"But—" She caught her mentor's gaze, and muttered a, "yes, Pebblepeak," then turned and sprinted away, her paws carrying her quickly across the moor. She looked at home with the wind running through her pelt, her skinny legs letting her lean body move swiftly. Like their mother, Willowpaw would most likely hunt on the moor more than in the forest.

"Meet me here tonight?" the red-brown she-cat asked softly, her eyes now showing full emotion. It was the look Boulderclaw gave his kits and his mate; the look of longing, the look of love. This she-cat was in love with Pebblepeak. By the look of his glowing eyes and flexing claws, he loved her back.

"I'll see you then," Pebblepeak murmured softly.

"Squirrelleap!" The sharp call came from her Clanmates, who were bounding back towards them.

"I love you," she whispered to Pebblepeak then lapped at the water before racing to her Clanmates. "Sorry, I needed a drink!" she told her patrol members. The tom curled his lip at Pebblepeak but then led his cats away.

"I love you too..." Pebblepeak stared after her wistfully, then forced himself to turn and pad away, slowly getting into a trot. But he stopped short when he saw Willowpaw sitting by a bush not far, close enough to hear everything he had said.

Ravenpaw was washed from the dream when Willowpaw rolled away, breaking their touched noses apart. He backed up, his mind flashing to Pebblepeak. Was he really seeing a cat from another Clan? A part of him told him to inform his mentor, or maybe Acornstar, but fear kept him still. And understanding.

Ravenpaw's own father, Boulderclaw, had fallen in love with his mother when she was still a BatClan warrior, and this was no different. Pebblepeak had fallen in love like any other cat. *But with a* SageClan *cat,* he told himself. Pebblepeak couldn't help himself, right? It was love, and you can't choose love. That's what his mother and Berrywhisker had said to him and his littermates; *"You don't choose love, love chooses you."*

Ravenpaw shook his head and looked at Blossompaw. He thought about touching her nose, but he felt too much fear. He didn't want to see her telling him off anymore, calling him different and more loved. He looked at the rest of the apprentices, but he didn't want to intrude on their lives as well. Jaypaw and Willowpaw were his family, he wanted to see if they were safe. And he had.

Leaving the den quietly, he paused at the entrance and looked around the clearing. The guards didn't seem to notice him; they were focused on the outside of the clearing, not the inside. He hurried across the clearing and slipped into the nursery, shivering with delight at the warm, milky scent. He looked over at

Goldenpool, and his heart melted.

Goldenpool was lying peacefully in her nest, side moving up and down, while her three kits were against her side, hiding in the warmth of her fur. He padded over and looked at the happy, calm mother and felt absolute sadness. In just a few months, Goldenpool would leave her kits alone to live out the rest of their lives.

Shock flashed through him. Goldenpool was going to die and leave behind her kits, just like her own mother had done. She had even told him her fear of leaving her kits, telling him she wanted to be there for them. But she was going to leave them. *Should I tell her?* he asked himself. No. He didn't want her to live the rest of her moons in fear. She deserved to spend them in happiness, in contentment. She could be happy.

He cursed his ability to see the future. He hated knowing this awful truth and hiding it from the sweet old queen. Shaking his head, he leaned down and breathed in Stormkit's kit-sweet scent, his heart going weak. She was so innocent, but someday he would be sure she would be an amazing warrior. Or maybe a medicine cat...? Could she maybe take after her mother?

He knew he was wrong. He could feel the warrior spirit inside of her, even as a tiny kit. She was going to be a strong warrior, he knew that. Feeling completely calm near her, he leaned forward and touched her nose with his, but stopped himself. He always tried to see Stormkit's future, but never Heatherkit. So, he turned and touched Heatherkit's nose instead.

Stormkit was standing proudly, surrounded by her Clanmates with Heatherkit right beside her. "Stormpaw! Heatherpaw! Stormpaw! Heatherpaw!"

Apprentices! *Ravenpaw felt a flash of excitement. He had gone all the way to six moons in the future, and the two tiny kits he had seen just a few moments before were growing into fine cats, their kit fluff almost gone and their bodies shaped like normal EchoClan cats. Oakcloud walked up to them, touching their noses with his.*

"Your mother and brother would be so proud of you," he said with

pained eyes.

"I know," Heatherpaw murmured with a strange look. "They told me."

Oakcloud looked at her in surprise. "Did Goldenpool visit you?" he whispered with hope.

She nodded and turned her gaze through the moving cats that were heading for their chores and looked at the nursery. Ravenpaw followed her gaze, but nothing was there. "She's right there." The kit flicked her ear to the entrance of the nursery, then looked back at her shocked father. "Don't you see her?"

Ravenpaw stumbled out of the vision, shocked to silence. Did Heatherkit just claim she saw her dead kin? Licking his jaws and trying to wet his muzzle, he turned and quickly left the den, racing over to the medicine cat's den and hiding in his nest, curling close to Mossrain. His mentor, still deeply sleeping with a light snore, moved closer to warm him.

Ravenpaw felt plagued with knowledge. He could know anything about any future with the touch of a nose. He could never use it for comfort like every other cat, he would use it for knowledge, to know who would live and who would die. He mewled in fear. He couldn't do this. He was still a kit! Now he knew that Pebblepeak was breaking the warrior code and Heatherkit saw her dead kin, and that's not even thinking of everything he had seen before!

I'm doing it! He decided with a sudden shock. He didn't know why it shocked him so much, he had been thinking about it for quite a while, but he was sure now, wasn't he? He needed to go to the Moonstream, but Mossrain would never bring him there. He had to go by himself.

And he would go tonight.

It feels like years since I last updated, and this chapter was ssssooooo short! I guess I forgot how stressful school is. I literally didn't write in this for like two weeks straight. I was planning on making this much longer, with the trip to the Moonstream (Yup, he's actually going!) in this chapter, but it

took me so long to update I decided I could make that the next chapter and set Rowanpaw's back to Twenty-Three. Which, might possibly, be the last chapter to our story?????? I know it doesn't really seem like a good end, with the story not progressing too much, but I've always made the first book of Ravenpaw's story a cliffhanger, and I'm keeping that! And I think it will be a big one!

Question #1: What do you think of the story ending in just two chapters?

Question #2: Have you enjoyed the first book so far?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ravenpaw waited at the entrance of his den, watching anxiously at the camp entrance. It was dark, just past moonhigh, and Russetdawn was sure to be getting her replacement soon. When she went into the warriors' den, he would hurry out. The next guard would, of course, find his scent, but they would hopefully assume Russetdawn had seen him out.

He could deal with the consequences in the morning.

Then, there was movement. Russetdawn stood up and stretched her spine, then padded for the warriors' den. Ravenpaw watched closely, and the moment her tail disappeared he raced across the clearing and slipped down the pathway. His legs were numb and tired and he stumbled unsteadily down but managed to keep himself steady enough.

He hurried down into the dark forest, his legs feeling weak and his fur beginning to bristle at the look of the tall, towering trees. The shadows seemed to stretch out and grip for his fur, trying to drag him into their depths. He had been in the forest at night before when he had gone to the Moonstream for the first time, but Mossrain's company had distracted him. Now, in complete silence, he was scared and helpless.

If something jumped out at him, he wouldn't be able to protect himself. Fear crept through his fur, and he started moving faster, his fatigue forgotten and uncared for in order for him to go faster. Every time the forest creaked he jumped into the air, wanting to run back to camp and tuck into the side of his mother or littermates, wishing to be a kit with no worries.

But in one day everything had changed. He was happy he was finally training, but also depressed of having so many things he had to do. He shivered in fear as a fox called far in the distance. Licking his jaws, Ravenpaw got into a run, flattening his ears to ignore

everything around him.

He tripped in the unfamiliar forest, pain flaring up his front leg. He forced himself to slow, his fur standing on end, and he tucked himself close to a fern bush, hiding in its depths as he checked his burning paw. He couldn't see much in the darkness, but it looked okay. He gave it soft licks until it felt better, then he hurried on again, sticking close to the ground. His fur brushed against undergrowth, and suddenly his paw touched smooth, hard-packed soil. He felt around to find himself on a worn path.

Relief flooded him. This was a common way his Clanmates had come for many moons, flattening down the earth until it was clear of dangerous vines and thorns. Feeling slightly more confident, Ravenpaw hurried along it, hoping he was still going the right way. It would've been easier to go through the moorland, but he likely would've been spotted by whoever took over moorland guard position from Silverstrike.

Then a faint scent came to his nose. A fresh, sweet breeze. He remembered it from when he traveled over SageClan territory. He hurried forward but hesitated after he left the path, and through a break in the trees he saw he was at the edge of his territory. He slipped from a patch of heavy undergrowth to see himself staring out at SageClan's moor. He looked out at the moorland, trying to remember where the cave was.

He had a feeling he wasn't quite close enough yet, so he hurried along at the edge of the forest. He could smell the scent markers from his own Clan and the other's, strong and threatening. He could feel the tension in the scent markers and guessed the two Clans had run into each other on their last patrols.

When he was pretty close to the Old Thunderpath, he looked closely over the moorland, anxiously searching for a SageClan patrol, but it was empty of cats, as far as he could tell. Shaking out his fur, he raced forward, breaking past the scent markers with a flash of guilt. He was breaking the warrior code by going into another Clan's territory.

But I follow the medicine cat code, he reminded himself, and he knew

medicine cats were allowed to pass into another Clan's territory if they had to. And there was the rule for both codes that any Clan cat that needed to go to the Star Cave—with their leader with them—could go. *Medicine cats can't be turned away,* he told himself.

He slowed as he neared the Star Cave, and suddenly the strain on his muscles revealed themselves. He mewled in pain as a feeling like fire flared through his veins and he almost dropped. He had been so fearful of the dark forest and then of being seen he had kept moving, forgetting how young and weak his muscles were. His pads felt raw and his legs burned at every step closer to the stacked boulders.

He crawled inside and collapsed next to the side of the Moonstream, feeling weak relief that he was finally here. For a moment, he wished he hadn't come all the way here, but reminded himself he had no choice if he wanted to be free of his curse. Ravenpaw took a few laps from the Moonstream, feeling weak from the wonderful taste of freezing water. Letting out a grateful sigh, he calmed his screaming muscles and leaned his head down to his paws.

He waited in silence, but when he opened his eyes a few moments later to find himself still at the Moonstream side. He closed his eyes again, sinking deeper into the ground by shifting his weight. *Echo, I know you don't like my decision, but please...*

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them again.

He was in the familiar clearing he often was in whenever Echo visited him, and the silver tabby was standing near, her green eyes misty and her thick black stripes shining in her starry, transparent fur.

"Hello, young one," she murmured. "You took your time coming; I hoped you decided to keep your power."

"Mossrain wouldn't let me come," he answered, though he knew she had most likely been watching him and already knew.

"So you came without his knowledge," she meowed with a nod, confirming his thoughts. "He'll feel betrayed when you return, and it may

take a while for him to trust you again."

"I know." He dropped his head, wishing Echo would not make him feel worse about sneaking from his camp. He knew he would be found out, and he would get in trouble, but he believed it was worth it. Mossrain would've never taken him.

"Perhaps you're right," Echo meowed, reading his thoughts. She sighed, dropping her head, then forced it back up to show sad eyes. "Are you ready?" she asked softly. "Remember what this ability brought you," she added before he could say anything. "It allowed you to save Stormkit's life; without your ability, she would be gone. She would be dead. And you know to tell Goldenpool to spend all the time she can with her kits. You knew to tell your father to see his mother before she came here. You have an amazing gift, Ravenpaw, one that will help your Clan."

"I don't want to be special," he meowed after a moment, unable to look her in the eyes, so he instead looked at his paws. "I want to be normal."

"Well, you can't." He looked up, surprised by the fierceness in her voice. There were spikes of ice in her gaze. "You're already different—better than many even without this power. You're a medicine cat, Ravenpaw, you need everything to heal your Clan! You'll see a lot of death in your life before you come to join us—"

Unusually like him, Ravenpaw asked scaredly, "do you know when I'll die?" Fear crept through his body when he saw the weak truth in the she-cat's gaze.

"Yes." She was unable to lie to him, he could tell. "You have a destiny, young one, a destiny some here don't want you to live up to." Surprise lit his gaze, but he said nothing. "This ability will help you save lives. As I said before, you'll see death whether you have this ability or not. But remember this power I gave you can, and will, save the lives of not only your Clanmates but possibly all Clan cats."

"StarClan doesn't want me to live my destiny?" he asked softly, looking back at his paws. Was he going to turn out like Firebreeze? Was he going to end up murdering his Clanmates?

"No, young one," Echo reassured him. "It is not something you will do, I

promise. Just something that will..." She sucked in a breath, suddenly realizing she had revealed too much. "It doesn't matter, young one. You came to stop knowing of the future, not to learn more, right?" Something shined in her eyes. "Unless you want guidance for the future of your Clan, I can *give it to you."*

"Really?" He looked up again, seemingly hopeful.

"But you must keep your power." Her eyes were serious and hard. "I can tell you something to follow through your many moons of life, or you can leave knowing nothing. It is up to you."

"That's mean, Echo," he whispered softly, "why do you want me to keep something I don't want?"

She came forward, wrapping herself around him. Her fur was misty and cool, like the spray from the camp waterfall. "I don't have the time, Ravenpaw, it may already be too late. An ene—" Echo broke off and stepped away, her eyes again clearly saying she shouldn't have said anything.

Ravenpaw knew she was doing it on purpose. She was tempting him with more and more knowledge. He dug his claws into the ground, thinking hard. He wanted to know what she was going to tell him, so he could help his Clan as he had always wanted to do.

"Your power helps your Clan as well," Echo whispered in his ear. "It will help you save lives, just like the knowledge I'll give you. Tell me you'll keep your power, and I'll tell you what you need to know."

"Okay," he mewled. He had come expecting to lose his power, but he was going to keep it instead. It was still worth coming to, though, if he was going to learn about the future of his Clan.

"Thank you," she murmured in his ear. "What would you like to know?"

"You said you were going to tell me something to live by?" He stared into her eyes, searching for the truth.

Echo nodded slowly, eyes soft. "No matter what, Ravenpaw—it doesn't matter which StarClan cat says not to, do not listen to them. Always, always, *follow your heart."*

He looked at her in fear. Did some of StarClan not want him to follow his heart? To do what he wanted to do?

"Don't think about that," Echo murmured in his ear, her voice soft and touching his cheek like mist. "Just follow your heart, young one."

"Y-you said something about it may be too late?" he stuttered, looking over at her. She slowly leaned forward and gently brushed his muzzle with her nose; it felt like icy mist against his skin.

"The Clans must be ready," she meowed quietly, "an enemy will come and they all must be ready."

With a blink of his eyes, Echo was gone. And with another he was awake.

"What in StarClan are you doing here?" a deep, rough meow came from outside the Star Cave. A strong wave of cat scent washed over Ravenpaw.

SageClan! Swallowing his fear, he forced himself to creep out from the hollow, finding himself standing before three SageClan warriors. The one who had spoken was a thick-furred brown tabby, his dark eyes narrowed with open hostility. Ravenpaw recognized one the cats as Squirrelleap, Pebblepeak's SageClan mate. The last patrol member was a gray tabby tom.

"What are doing here, kit?" the lead cat hissed.

Fear caught his words in his throat, but he forced himself to mewl weakly, "I-I'm an apprentice!" he meowed, "and I'm a-allowed to b-be here!" His throat was dry and he knew his eyes would look weak. The lead tom scoffed.

"You're EchoClan, you have no right to be on our territory or near the Star Cave! Only medicine cats or cats accompanied by their leader may come here!" he hissed, tail lashing. His fur was bristling with hostility, and Ravenpaw's tail tip flicked softly in fear.

"I am a medicine cat," he said quietly, "Mossrain's apprentice."

The lead cat's eyes narrowed. "EchoClan already has two medicine

cats, and that mouse-brained Mossrain is barely older than a kit!"

"No, remember what Poppysong said? She said Mossrain had gotten an apprentice because Goldenpool was in the nursery." It was Squirrelleap, her eyes soft and caring. She clearly felt bad for him, Ravenpaw noted and felt grateful to the young she-cat. Could it be because he was still practically a kit, or because she had a soft-spot for Pebblepeak's Clan?

"I was on a patrol when they went to the Moonstream on the half-moon," the gray tabby spoke up, "There were three cats—Mossrain, Sandflight, and a small black kit. Him, I think." He nodded to Ravenpaw.

The young apprentice felt a flash of relief. Two of the cats were on his side, but the lead tom still looked hostile. After a moment, he gave up. "Fine! Let's get him back to his territory!" He lashed his tail and began to lead the way for EchoClan territory.

Echo's words ran through his head, about when she talked about the approaching enemy. When were they coming? Was it soon, or moons later? He needed to tell Mossrain! Ravenpaw quickly followed the other Clan's warriors, but they were moving too slow. He started walking faster, and the lead cat hissed but picked up his pace.

They were nearing the edge of the moor when Ravenpaw saw the bright white pelt of his mother at the side of the forest.

"Snowfern!" he cried, racing past the cats. The brown tom hissed but his pawsteps faded as the apprentice ran forward. More cats were with his mother, including his father and his mentor, along with Featherpaw.

She looked out at the moorland and yowled in relief and also anger. Her paws worked furiously on the ground as he ran up, and the moment he passed over the border his mother was at him, knocking him over and covering his face with fierce licks. "You stupid, stupid kit!" she hissed, with both love and fury.

He felt his father's thick fur against his back, and his mother

withdrew to reveal his father, whose eyes were wide and fearful. "Great StarClan, what were you doing in SageClan territory?" he growled, his eyes fierce but also loving, just like Snowfern's.

"I needed to visit the Moonstream," he whispered. He cast his gaze to Mossrain's, and the question in his gaze was clear.

Did you get rid of your power?

Ravenpaw gave the slightest shake of his head, and relief flooded the tom's eyes. But he was blocked by Featherpaw. "I was worried about you, mouse-brain!" she hissed. "Everybody was! Jaypaw and Willowpaw begged me to come and help look for you since they couldn't leave camp."

"I wasn't gone for long," Ravenpaw whispered, surprised his Clanmates were making such a big deal. He had disappeared since moonhigh, and it looked barely past sunrise. Surely they hadn't thought something horrible happened?

"You have no idea..." Snowfern whispered, and he looked over at her quickly.

"What? What happened?" He looked desperately from cat to cat, wanting an answer. It was his father who spoke.

"The dawn patrol was on the Thunderpath border and a bunch of monsters came. They stopped at the edge of our territory and Twolegs came out; loads of them, maybe three for each of our Clan. They spread out and began to search the forest. Silverstrike said he scented dogs—we were scared they had got you."

Ravenpaw stifled a shocked meow.*"The Clans must be ready,"* Echo had said, *"an enemy will come and they all must be ready."*

Did she mean the Twolegs? A terrified shiver ran up his spine, and he could already tell the future moons would be dreadful for his dear Clanmates.

Ravenpaw's last chapter of this book! A little short, and maybe a little badly-written, but I was excited to finish up the first book and I rushed it a bit. One more chapter from Rowanpaw's

view, and then it will end! I'll add a loose plot for the second book, and I'll give the name at the end of Chapter Twenty-Three!

Question #1: What do you think will happen with the Twolegs?

Question #2: Do you think Echo's warning had to do with the Twolegs, or something else?

Chapter Twenty-Three

[image]

I hope that picture appears, it took forever to make and put up there! If it doesn't, it's a family tree of my OCs, and I'm really happy about it. The dotted lines in between cats show they are/were mates and solid lines mean parents and their children. Hopefully, it makes sense, tell me if you get confused about it and I'll try to explain better. I just think it brings you a little closer to my story!

"Can we stop, please? Rain needs some rest."

Rowanpaw felt another flare of loathing for the Twoleg Place cats slowing them down. They had been journeying for five days—they should've reached the Clan territories by now, especially with Rohan's supposed "shortcut" that he claimed would get them there sooner. Rowanpaw was finally heading back to see his brother, but they were still a few days away because of Rain's injuries slowing them down!

The apprentice's side was still sore from so much walking, his wound opening up many times while it tried to heal, but he kept going strong. It made him furious that Rain was having so much trouble with her back that she had took take constant breaks.

"I'm okay, Hickory, I promise," Rain muttered, still limping forward with a low head, but Birchsplash and Rohan—both leading the group—slowed to a stop. Rowanpaw growled in anger but stopped and stayed by Emberheart's side as she went over to join the group by Rain, who was being lowered to her paws by her mate. Emberheart settled softly on the ground, her stomach still slowly extending and rounding from her kits.

"We can't stay in here without clean water," Wish meowed softly, her voice hoarse and broken.

"You won't have clean water again until it rains," Hazelfur muttered,

scratching the ground with her claws with flattened ears.

Rowanpaw's throat burned from the thought of the cool fresh water in the Twoleg garden. They had enjoyed the cool taste for quite a while, with each cat bringing a moss ball dripping with water along with them. The moss stayed wet for a few days, though it took licking it with rough tongues to get to the moisture after the first night.

"Will the kits even survive?" Rain whispered, looking at her side scaredly. "You have more cats and more hunger in your territory; you say it will get deadly in leaf-bare—will my kits even survive to see the new season?"

It's always deadly, Rowanpaw thought darkly, but he stayed quiet, knowing by now it wasn't his place to speak out.

"Our cats will do everything in their power to keep your kits safe—to keep all kits safe," Birchsplash meowed with a glance at Emberheart. His littermate sent him a glittering look of gratitude.

"I hope so..." Rain murmured, looking at her belly with a lightly flicking tail.

"It'll be better than here," Hickory meowed, "I promise."

Rowanpaw was about to snap. Anger filled him to his core. He just wanted to be home! He just wanted to be with his brother, to feel his littermate's messy muddy fur against his side; he wanted to have his scent glands sticky with the smell of sap and mud to be clodded in his claws. He wanted the too-soft ground that made his paws sink down to the middle of legs in some places of their territory.

He wanted his home. He wanted his family. He wanted his brother.

"We might as well take this time to hunt," Birchsplash meowed. "We'll probably reach the territories by sunhigh tomorrow if we leave early. Hazelfur, will you lead Emberheart and Rowanpaw on a patrol to find something to eat?"

Hazelfur, who had crouched down nearby, sighed and forced herself to her paws. "Alright, let's go," she meowed hoarsely and padded

away without another word. Rowanpaw looked at Emberheart with an annoyed expression then forced himself to follow the two she-cats. Emberheart butted his shoulder in an attempt to cheer him up, but he just grumbled with a quiet complaint.

They went not in the direction they were heading, nor from where they had come. They traveled along the Old Thunderpath with muzzles up and open, trying to get past the thick sooty smell. It clogged Rowanpaw's scent glands, but not in the same way as his home did. He was still shocked with himself at how much his heart longed for his disgusting territory.

"Hear that?" Hazelfur whispered, barely audible, and stopped, raising her tail for silence. Rowanpaw, realizing he had only been searching with his nose and not his hearing, focused his ears on the sounds around him. It took a few moments, but he heard a light squeaking from the rubble of Twoleg den.

"Spread out, try to circle in and trap it," Emberheart ordered, touching Rowanpaw's shoulder with her tail tip then flicking it to one of the sides of the den. He nodded in understanding and crouched down, ready to stalk over, but Emberheart quickly nudged his hind leg to get him to bring it in, then she purred quietly in approval and headed off on silent paws.

Rowanpaw stayed quiet, knowing he was just here to stop the mouse or rat from running in his direction; if he got the chance to pounce, he would try, but only if he knew he would catch it—he couldn't let it escape because of a kit-like hope of being the hero of the hunt.

He listened closely to the squeaking and stopped when Emberheart flicked an ear with a glance at him. He could tell by the look in her eyes she wanted him to stay here. He couldn't see Hazelfur through the dark pile of burnt wood, but he heard a sudden squeal as a mouse was killed.

Three more suddenly shot out, running straight at Rowanpaw. Emberheart jumped to her paws and raced for him. The mice suddenly noticed him and tried to turn away, but his surprise was overcome by his instinct and he leaped, trapping one under his

paws. Emberheart flashed past, breathing heavy, and managed to land on a third mouse. The last scuttled away through the sooty grass and disappeared into another den.

"Let's go get it!" Rowanpaw meowed, leaving his mouse despite his grumbling stomach and racing for the den. Emberheart hissed at him to come back.

"It's not worth it, let's take these back!"

But he was determined to catch more. He knew both Rain and Emberheart would get their own mouse, so he would have to share the two others with the rest of the cats. He was desperate to try to get more, so he could eat more than a morsel.

He raced to the side of the den, slipping inside a small hole in the black wall. Inside was dark and dusty, and he coughed in an attempt to clear his throat. Instantly, the mouse from before shot out from underneath a large nest, like the one he had laid on in the first den. He chased after it, his pads burning an old wound searing with pain, but he ignored it and leaped, missing it by only a whisker. But he continued after it, sliding around corners as it struggled to escape. It darted under old Twoleg objects but ran out when he came close, and the game seemed to last forever until he finally gave a large, powerful leap and trapped its tail under his paw.

It squealed and flipped around, but Rowanpaw pounced on its neck without mercy. His teeth sunk into its thin flesh and sweet blood leaked onto his tongue.

"Rowanpaw!" Emberheart's fierce meow came from outside the den. Sighing, he picked up the mouse and stalked towards the small hole, slipping under with a groan of complaint. The chase of the mouse had tired him out, and a quick look at one of his pads showed a light trail of blood. "That was stupid! You had no idea what was inside that den!"

"Yes, I did—a mouse." He looked up at her with challenging eyes, letting the mouse sit at his paws. "Back at home, we do *anything* to bring back prey, short of breaking the warrior code. Why shouldn't I

run into the unknown to get more prey for us?"

"Because it's dangerous!" she hissed, tail lashing. Hazelfur walked up slowly, the three mice hanging by their tails from her jaws. Her eyes were unreadable, and she stayed quiet.

"Everything's dangerous!" he growled in return, claws flexing into the ground.

"You could've *died!*" She had said it like it was a fact that would get him to stop arguing, but his fur rose higher.

"We're *all* going to die eventually, especially without prey!" His eyes were fierce and anger was pumping through his muscles. Couldn't she see that they needed every morsel of prey, every bit of strength even the smallest bite could give?

Her eyes went weak. "Rowanpaw, you can't run into the unknown. It's not bravery, it's stupidity. I don't want to lose you." She stepped forward and tried to touch his cheek with her nose, assuming her soft words had deflated the anger in between them.

He stepped back, rolling the mouse with him. He couldn't fight with her knowing she wouldn't fight back, so he turned his head away to not stare into her eyes. "Let's get back to the others. I just want to go home." He picked up his mouse and walked away without another word. He could feel Emberheart's eyes burning into his back, but he ignored it.

What he couldn't ignore was the flaring pain in his flank from the old wound, and he cast a gaze at it to see blood trickling down his coat. He struggled to keep himself from biting down in pain, not wanting to puncture the mouse's thin flesh even more. Emberheart and Hazelfur soon caught up to him, but they walked in silence.

When the rest of the cats came into view, everything seemed normal, with Rain speaking softly with Hickory while Wish crouched over the silver tabby. Near them, Birchsplash had his head low to Aspenheart's and Rohan's, speaking quickly. Fern, Meadow, and Primrose were sleeping nearby, curled up in a pile. Birchsplash looked over when they approached, but instead of the expected

excitement at the prey, his eyes were glowing with fear.

"Rowanpaw, it just slipped out—" Birchsplash was cut off when Aspenheart shoved herself forward.

"Is it true?" she gasped, eyes wide with shock.

"Is *what* true?" Rowanpaw growled, irritated.

"That you're Ratpaw?" she whispered softly, and fury rippled down Rowanpaw's back, his fur standing on end. He whipped his eyes to Birchsplash's, dropping the mouse and gripping his claws into the ground to stop himself from jumping forward.

"You *told* her?" he hissed, tail fluffing and ears flattened.

"I didn't mean to!" Birchsplash sounded like a scolded kit trying to justify themself. "I knew you'd have to tell her eventually, so I told her to talk to you! She kept prying and I accidentally said Ratpaw instead of Rowanpaw!" he mewled.

"So it really is true?" Aspenheart whispered softly. "You really are my son...?" Her tail was low and brushed over the ground. Rohan was standing a little behind her, eyes wide with shock as he looked over Rowanpaw's body, probably searching for similarities.

He whipped his head to face the gray she-cat, a soft growl in his throat. "You haven't been my mother since the day you abandoned me!"

She was silent for a moment, then she cast her gaze down to her paws. "You said that you knew my kits hated me and had never forgiven me... Now I know why."

Rowanpaw decided to ignore her, his anger focused on Birchsplash. "You had no right to tell her!" he hissed.

"Rowanpaw, it wasn't his fault—" Emberheart started in a soft voice, but he whipped around and hissed at her, and she took a step back, surprised at his fierceness. He tore his head back to Birchsplash.

"You shouldn't have said anything!" he growled.

Aspenheart let out a distressed mew. "You... You changed your name to Rowanpaw. Why?" There was a desperate look in her eyes. Rowanpaw took a crude satisfaction from it.

"Because Ratpaw is a cruel name!" he hissed, fuming.

"Dawnstar would never let you change your name without my consent!" She seemed to be holding back her complete distress, but she was failing badly.

"Only the cats I care about know who I truly am!" he growled, then added a little quieter, "but one day everybody will know who I am."

"Your name is *Ratpaw*!" Aspenheart hissed with a weak fierceness. "You can't change that!"

"I'd rather leave my Clan then be stuck with a name like Ratpaw for the rest of my life!" he hissed, and he heard a sudden intake of breath from Emberheart. Rowanpaw's heart felt weak as the truth was revealed; he would rather become a loner then have 'Rat' for his name for the rest of his life. He had sworn to never abandon his Clan—would he really break that promise just to be who he wanted to? The answer came with an upsetting speed: *Yes.*

"Ratpaw...?" a soft mewl said, and he suddenly realized his younger siblings were awake. It was Primrose who had spoken, with soft but scared eyes. Her sisters stood right next to her. "But... Your name is Rowanpaw, isn't it?" she asked.

"Go see Wish," Rohan murmured, nosing his kits toward the three other cats, who were watching with interested and surprised eyes at the kin fighting. Hickory had a knowing, smug look on his face.

"Are you our brother?" Fern whispered. "Aspenheart said we had a brother named Ratkit, but at six moons he'd be Ratpaw. Is that really you?"

"I abandoned the name 'Rat' as soon as *our* mother abandoned me!" His tail lashed and he looked at Aspenheart with fury in his gaze.

"Why did she abandon you?" Meadow looked at him with curious, innocent eyes. "Was it on accident?"

"No." He looked at the she-cat with hard eyes. "She didn't think I would live, and she was too scared to see me die, so she took one of my littermates and *fled.* She ran away to protect her favorite and left me and my brother to die." Aspenheart's eyes were wide with horror as her son explained his hate for her.

"Is she gonna do that to us?" little Fern asked, looking fearfully at her mother.

"What?" Aspenheart threw her head in her daughter's direction. "Never! I would never abandon you!"

"You abandoned *me*," Rowanpaw growled.

As she turned to face him, probably to make a pointless argument on her behalf, Primrose growled with a voice so much like Rowanpaw's it was uncanny, "That mean's you'll abandon us when things get too hard!"

"I wouldn't!" Aspenheart turned back to face her three young kits. "I love you, I would never leave you!"

"So you didn't love me?" Rowanpaw scoffed, not surprised.

"Of course I did!" Aspenheart hurried in an attempt to reassure him.

"That means you'd abandon us!" Fern squealed in fear, hiding in Primrose's bigger frame.

"No!" Aspenheart cried. "I was young back then, I didn't know how to be a mother! I regretted it the moment I left--"

"Sure you did," Rowanpaw cut her off. "Why didn't you come back, then? Why didn't you come back when Lavenderkit was dying of thirst, of hunger?"

"We had another sister?" Primrose looked at her littermates in surprise. "Did she die?"

"Yes." Rowanpaw didn't give his mother a chance to explain. "She died a slow, painful death because of Aspenheart's arrogance! And she will *never* come back!"

He waited for Aspenheart to speak, but she just looked at him, defeated, then lowered her head, and stayed silent. Rohan, who had not said a thing during the entire argument, pressed against his mate's side in an attempt to comfort her. The she-cat tried to bring her muzzle down to Primrose's, trying to apologize, but the feisty she-kit leaped back, hissing.

"You lied to us!" she cried. "You said you would do anything to protect your kits, but you let one of your first kits die after leaving your first two!" She whipped past her mother, leaving her littermates behind, and ran to Rowanpaw's side. "He's the first one who didn't lie to us!"

"He didn't tell you who he was!" Aspenheart argued, her mew high-pitched with fear.

"Because of you!" Primrose replied with a similar anger to her brother's.

"You just met him!" Aspenheart looked desperate to gain back her daughter. Rowanpaw was filled with a coarse excitement at his mother's anguish.

"He's my brother, and he's been more truthful in the last few days than you ever have!" she hissed.

Aspenheart opened her jaws to answer, but Birchsplash stepped forward. "Enough!" he yowled. "This is pointless. We need to eat then keep moving; it's time for us to get back home. This soot will poison us if we stay in this area too long. Emberheart and Rain are vulnerable here, as are the kits. So stop this! Clan cats will be over there—" he flicked his tail to a place near a dead bush "—and loner cats over there—" he pointed to where Rain was settled with Wish and Hickory.

"Fine." Rohan nudged his mate back towards the others of their group. Meadow and Fern stayed where they were, looking from the Clans cats, who had moved to their spot with Primrose against Rowanpaw's size, and to their parents. Rohan looked over. "Meadow, Fern, come here!" he called.

Primrose looked over, her eyes shining with angry curiosity at where her sisters would choose to go. After a moment, Meadow hurried to her mother and tucked herself into the gray cat's side. Then she looked at Fern expectantly, but so was Primrose. Fern suddenly looked very small, whipping her head back and forth in fearful confusion.

Aspenheart didn't do anything. She just laid there, looking defeated. Fern was letting out terrified mewls but her mother and father didn't do anything. Rowanpaw's hate for them got even stronger, and he stood up from his spot against Primrose. The brown she-kit mewled in confusion.

"I'll be back, don't worry." Rowanpaw was surprised how quickly Primrose had taken his side, and how strong his protective feeling for her had grown since she said she trusted him. Flicking his ear, he padded over to the crouched form of Fern and touched her cheek with his nose.

She mewled and looked over, eyes fearful. "Why is everybody angry...?" she whispered.

He just pressed his muzzle against her's. "You don't have to choose a side, Fern, but you need to eat." She kept her eyes on her paws but gave a nod and got to her paws. She shot a sad look at Meadow and her parents before scampering over to join Primrose, who greeted her with happy mew.

Rowanpaw locked eyes with Rohan, and he could see the challenge there. For a moment, a shiver went over the apprentice as he thought of how close Rowan was to Rohan and wondered if early memories had given him the idea for his new name. He shook it away with a flick of his ear and went to join his sisters and Clanmates. He hadn't even chosen his name—Sparkkit did, and he didn't recall ever hearing Rohan around the camp. It was a sad accident that would haunt Rowanpaw for quite a while.

Each group got two mice to split between their cats. Emberheart took one mouse for herself, while Hazelfur and Birchsplash declined any prey and allowed Rowanpaw to share with Primrose and Fern. He took a small bite then split the rest evenly between his sisters. A

quick glance at the other group showed Rain with her own mouse, while Meadow chewed on half of a mouse and Wish took the other, though it seemed the she-cat didn't have much appetite and gave the remaining morsels of the mouse to Meadow.

Meadow looked at the new scraps, then looked at her sisters. She picked up the remaining bits of mouse and hurried them to her littermates. Surprisingly, she dropped the pieces in front of Rowanpaw. Her amber eyes glowed and she hurried away to finish up the rest of her prey.

Rowanpaw thought of giving the new prey meant for him to Fern or Primrose or Emberheart but knew it would make Meadow feel bad that he hadn't eaten it. Or was that his mind trying to tell him to take it to himself, and forget the others' troubles? He decided to not think about it as he munched down on the mouse bits.

He finished soon enough and licked at his jaws to give himself every bit of blood he may have left on his muzzle. Birchsplash looked to see if every cat had finished eating, then got to his paws with a hoarse breath. "We should get moving." By the way his tail flicked he looked excited of almost being home, but his eyes still shone with irritation from the earlier argument. *Which side is he on?* Rowanpaw wondered.

He stood up, feeling his sore muscles groan and creak while his pads burned and his wound seared. He was usually distracted when he's walking, but trying to stand with a clear mind let him know of every tiny pain in his body. Fern looked at him with curious eyes, as if she could see his pain.

"It'll feel better," she mewled softly. "Just wait."

He looked at her with soft eyes, then gave her forehead a lick, forcing his face to stay uncurled from the sooty, dry taste. He tried to hold back a cough but it turned into a fit when he didn't let it out. Primrose stood and started walking, and Rowanpaw and Fern followed after her. Emberheart and her littermates had already started along, while Rohan stayed close to his kit and Aspenheart took up a guard position in the back, letting Rain limp in front with Hickory pressing against her side. Wish stayed next to them and

continued to sniff at Rain's injuries along the way.

Originally, this chapter was like 8000 words long and I decided that it was much too long. So I went about halfway and found an okay place to cut it in half, then I put that part into the absolute last part of the story, chapter Twenty-Four! I also want to apologize for the writing of this chapter and the next, I feel like they weren't written as well as they could've been but I really wanted to finish the story.

Question #1: What are your thoughts about Primrose choosing Rowanpaw over her parents?

Question #2: What did you think about Aspenheart and Rohan finding out about Rowanpaw's true identity?

Chapter Twenty-Four

They walked as fast as they could, but it was still slow because of their tired, weak muscles and torn pads. After a while, the kits' heads went down, and soon after that, they dragged over the ground. The sun seemed to move incredibly slow over the sky, making it seem like moons until it could be seen as a different spot than before.

But the Twoleg dens seemed to be endless. They stretched out as far as Rowanpaw could see, though the soot had made his vision blurry and he found it hard to see too far in front of him. He wondered numbly if the others were having the same problem, but didn't decide on a verdict. It seemed his mind may have started to be affected as well.

Emberheart started limping and held up one of her paws. Rowanpaw saw it was the one she had hurt at the beginning of the journey-the old wound had opened up and was leaving a trail of blood behind her. Fern didn't even seem to notice as she started stepping into the trail, and the apprentice gently nudged her closer with his tail. She silently followed his lead and didn't say a thing.

Eventually, finally, the sunlight began to turn orange, darkening the sky above them and allowing the brightest of StarClan's members to shine. Rowanpaw found solace in the few glowing stars and suddenly wondered if Lavenderkit had been allowed into StarClan even though she had technically died a loner, by no fault of her own.

"Rain needs to rest!" Hickory called, and Rowanpaw's sudden calmness was dissolved.

"Honestly, Hickory, I'm fine." The injured she-cat looked at Birchsplash, who had slowed, but it was clear he didn't want to. "We can keep going, Hickory's just being a worry-mouse."

Birchsplash nodded and continued on, wanting to get a move on to

return home. Hickory looked frustrated, his tail flicking back and forth, but he followed his mate's lead and followed the Clan cats. Next to Rowanpaw, Fern gave a little mew as she tripped. "I'm tired," she whispered to Rowanpaw, clearly not wanting to be bothersome but not able to hold in her complaints.

He looked at Primrose and saw that even though she looked tired and would gratefully take a rest, she was forcing herself on with vigor. He looked back at Fern, wishing he was big enough to carry her on his shoulders, but he was still only seven moons old, and with her only five moons younger he didn't have the strength nor size.

"I know it's hard, but we'll stop once it gets dark, okay? Then we can rest, I promise," he whispered to her, giving her sooty ear a soft lick. She mewled a quiet agreement, but lightly leaned against his side as they went on.

Even though his heart was begging him to get home, he was wishing for the sun to go down. Not for himself, even though he weak and tired and wanted to rest his pads, but for Fern and Primrose to be able to rest in peace. He continued to glance behind them at the setting sun, watching the golden rays fade into darkness as it disappeared.

As it turned darker his eyesight got worse, and he started tripping much more. They had slowed their pace for the tiny kits, who whimpered at every step, but Birchsplash kept them going until the orange from the setting sun was almost gone and the sky was blazing with StarClan warriors. Only then did he say they could rest, and Rowanpaw forced himself off the Thunderpath and onto the burnt grass on the side.

Fern and Primrose fell against his side, and after only a few quick moments they were sleeping. He looked at their soft pads and could see the peeling skin, and he moved forward and gently started cleaning them, not wanting the soot to sink in and get them infected. Primrose woke and groggily watched him for a moment before falling into sleep again. Fern barely even moved when he cleaned hers.

"I'll go hunting," Birchsplash meowed, tiredly getting to his paws.

Instantly, Rowanpaw drew his legs in. "I'll come with-"

"No," Birchsplash cut him off, "You've done enough today. Just rest." His eyes told the BatClan apprentice it wasn't a suggestion.

"I'll come with you," Aspenheart meowed proudly, and Rohan agreed and stood at his mate's side. Meadow looked at him with fear but he nudged her in Rowanpaw's direction. She cast her father a glance the apprentice couldn't see and weakly hurried over to her siblings and crawled on top of Primrose against Rowanpaw's side before collapsing to her stomach and quickly falling asleep.

"Can you see if you can find any clean cobwebs? Quite a few cats need them," Wish called, casting a quick glance at Rowanpaw. His side seemed to burn even more.

"I'll go with to help look." Hazelfur, who seemed to have endless strength and commitment for her Clan, stood up and shook out her fur before following her brother. Emberheart stood, too, but she didn't try to join them. Instead, she limped over to Rowanpaw looked at her injured paw.

"I'm sorry about earlier," she whispered.

Even though he was still annoyed, Rowanpaw meowed, "want to lay down?"

She looked up, grateful, and then settled against his back, purring as she slid down. Once she settled, she let out a slow breath and relaxed against him. Her touch made Rowanpaw feel rested and at home.

Pretty soon, he fell into an uncomfortable deep sleep.

And then he was awake with Birchsplash standing over him.

"It's time to get moving," he meowed roughly.

Rowanpaw flicked his ear and nodded, and the older tom stepped away. The kits were still curled against his side, while Emberheart's

spine warmed his back. Early sunlight broke through the dark air, and Rowanpaw knew the dawn patrol would likely still be sleeping. He envied them for a long moment. "Did you find any prey or cobwebs?" Rowanpaw asked groggily, letting out a big yawn that burned his throat.

Birchsplash shook his head sadly. "Nothing. Today, anything we find we'll bring back for the Clan."

Rowanpaw nodded slowly, then nudged each one of the kits in turn. He was surprised Meadow had not gone back to her parents when they returned, but he was happy that she looked rested and peaceful next to her littermates.

Primrose was the first to stir from his poking nose. She looked around with clouded eyes, but they cleared after a few moments. Meadow was the next to wake, with Fern quickly following. They mewled but didn't say anything as they forced themselves to their paws. Rowanpaw hadn't noticed Emberheart was awake until she stood and stretched out her muscles.

Rowanpaw got to his burned pads and rolled his muscles, wincing as pain flooded from his open wound. He turned and looked at it, and saw it was trying to close, but dried blood covered the fur around it. He didn't even try to lick it clean.

"Let's get moving!" Birchsplash called, starting for their destination once again. He didn't wait or slow for the rest of the cats, so they had to hurry to catch up before they were left behind. Fern mewled and hurried to stay by Rowanpaw's side, while Primrose and Meadow, now with new energy, bounced ahead.

"You should save your energy," Aspenheart called to her kits, but they completely ignored her.

Knowing she was slightly right and also curious, Rowanpaw meowed to them after a few moments, "you don't want to hurt your pads," he added, "come back and walk by me." The sisters looked at each other before running back and traveling next to him. Rowanpaw shot a smug look at his mother.

She looked away and focused on the decaying Twoleg dens. They continued to walk, trying to find any type of scent of any prey, but there was nothing to show any life outside the small group. The sun slowly moved up the sky, and as time went on the group slowed. Meadow and Primrose seemed more tired than the rest, probably from their play.

Rowanpaw remembered their adorable play in their garden, and pain pierced his heart when he realized those days were over for the young kits. Living in BatClan would bring them nearly to starvation, and their energy would slowly dwindle to nothing.

"Look!" Birchsplash suddenly yowled. "The fence!"

Rowanpaw's head shot forward, eyes wide, and he saw far off in the distance, the fencing that lined the edge of the Twoleg place and the start of BatClan territory. "Home!" the apprentice whispered, and suddenly everybody around him didn't matter. The pain in his side, in his paws, in his muscles-it all faded as he raced forward, his paws thrumming on the hard ground as he just ran and ran.

Emberheart called after him, as did one his little sisters, Primrose, maybe, but he didn't care. He ran until he was so near the fence the dank smell of his home filled his muzzle. It was then his legs gave out and he stumbled to a stop before collapsing on his stomach. His breath was ragged and his throat burned and screamed for water, but his excitement of almost seeing his brother made him feel so free he thought he could've run all the way home. Clearly, he couldn't, but he had still believed he could've.

He stayed where he was until the rest of the cats reached him, claws sheathing and unsheathing into the tough ground. The moment Birchsplash and Hazelfur past him, he was on his paws and hurrying after them. Primrose struggled to follow him but eventually fell back with her littermates, sounding defeated.

His heart twisting with the need to see his brother but also be with his new siblings, he forced himself to slow enough the three kits could walk with him. Primrose let out a weak purr but seemed to have a bigger step in her paws. Birchsplash slowed as they reached the Twoleg den that had spilled onto the Old Thunderpath, and

Rowanpaw remembered the start of their journey. It seemed like yesterday, but also moons and moons ago.

"We should just go around," Hazelfur meowed, sniffing at the small pathway in front of the other side of the Old Thunderpath, where the strong scent of fox had scared them off. "The fox scent as faded, and we don't have the energy to go over." Deciding she was right, Hazelfur padded across through the small strip of grass.

Fern had drawn closer to Rowanpaw as she heard of a fox, and as they neared the pathway she quickly switched sides to be farther away and next to her sisters. Primrose and Meadow seemed okay, though both of them had flicking tail tips and quickened their steps to make it through quicker.

The rest of the cats got across without a problem, and they all made it to the opening in the fence together safely. The smell of his territory seemed much worse after being gone for so long, and he noticed some of the Twoleg place cats seemed uncomfortable as well. Did Rowanpaw get his hate for his territory from his father, maybe? By the look of it, Rohan also seemed to dislike the smell and had his muzzle curled in disgust.

Fern raised her muzzle, small nose twitching, and took a deep breath of the dank scent. "It smells wonderful!" she meowed, and Primrose agreed with a happy mewl. Meadow looked like she disagreed, but she didn't say anything.

"I agree, little one," Emberheart murmured, her eyes closed as she took in everything from her home, while Hazelfur and Birchsplash did the same. Then their eyes glowed, and all the Clan warriors started forward. Rowanpaw and his sisters followed though it took a moment for the rest of the Twoleg cats.

They walked quickly on the soft ground until they reached the small pool of water, where the Clan cats started drinking hungrily, but the Twoleg place cats seemed to hesitate. After a moment, though, they drank slowly but without complaint. Well, at least the full-grown cats did.

"I want the water from the garden!" Meadow cried, sitting down

heavily on her haunches.

"We can't, Meadow," Wish meowed softly, walking closer to the kit and touching her muzzle to the young cat's. "I wish we could go back, too."

"For the water?" Meadow asked softly, scratching at the ground with her paws.

"For my brother," Wish replied quietly, eyes soft and filled with hurt. Meadow didn't respond but instead stared at her paws.

"Copper will be remembered for his bravery," Rohan told the she-cat, touching her ear with his nose. "He died for River and her unborn kits. We'll remember him for that. And we can tell River's kits when they're old enough to hear. His sacrifice won't be forgotten."

Rowanpaw had to admit his father sounded inspiring. He had a way with words, and his entrancing tone of voice could make any cat follow his lead. It was probably how the Clan cats decided to trust him. But Rowanpaw didn't. He wouldn't fall for the tomcat's trickery.

"Let's get home," Emberheart's mew cut in. "Let's go see our Clan." She looked at Rowanpaw with a quiet expression, though it was clear she was dying to see her mate, Heronclaw. She had told Rowanpaw she hadn't informed the white tom of her carrying kits, in fear he would've not allowed her to go on the mission.

The cats started off again. The ground stayed soft but solid for a small while, but soon their paws began to sink deeper and deeper. The Twoleg place cats didn't voice their complaints, but they did let out mews and hisses every few moments. Emberheart and her littermates had drawn ahead, used to the dank territory, though they forced themselves to slow enough for the loner cats to keep up.

Rowanpaw didn't really pay attention to the suckling mud tying into his fur-not completely, anyway. He just wanted to get home to his brother, to smell his muddy scent and see his glowing brown eyes for just a moment. He had never gone so long without seeing

him. He barely realized himself speeding up until Emberheart slowed him with her tail.

Eventually, though, they made it to the entrance of their camp. Rowanpaw was disappointed they hadn't run into any patrols but guessed some had either just gone out or just returned. "Listen, before we go in." Birchsplash turned to talk to the cats in a soft meow. "Some of the Clan may not like you being here, but don't get provoked. Oh, and also-" he cast an apologetic glance at Rowanpaw "-call Rowanpaw Ratpaw, the Clan won't accept his decision to change his name. Yet," he added when Rowanpaw looked at his hidden paws in anger.

Aspenheart let out a soft growl, while the rest of the cats let out murmurs of agreement. Birchsplash turned and led them to the low rocky ledges used to get back into their camp after leaving. "You all should wait down here for a few moments, to let us tell the Clan," Hazelfur meowed to the loner cats, and Birchsplash mewed his agreement. Emberheart stayed quiet as she past Birchsplash on the ledges. Rowanpaw quickly followed her, and the two warriors were right behind him.

As he pulled himself onto the top ledge he looked into the camp, and his heart flew. A few cats were practicing battle moves in the small clearing of camp, but he didn't care. Blazepaw was in front of the apprentices' den with Frondpaw and Carppaw. They were all as skinny as before but alive. He let out a meow of excited greeting, and his brother's head shot up.

"Ro-Ratpaw!" He scrambled to his paws, and Rowanpaw raced down the pathway, ignoring the pain in his pads and side once again, and he barreled into his brother. "You're okay!" Blazepaw cried, wiggling out from underneath his littermate, "and you stink!"

"I could say the same to you!" Rowanpaw shot back with a purr, then pressed his head into Blazepaw's neck.

"Emberheart!" Rowanpaw looked over with interest as Heronclaw raced across the clearing, though he slowed when he got to her and curled his slim body around her. "You should've told me we were having kits!" he scolded her, covering her ears in fierce but happy

licks.

Sandflight must've told him, Rowanpaw thought.

"You wouldn't have let me gone," Emberheart replied softly. Heronclaw grumbled a reply, something about how she was right. Clovertail was busy with Hazelfur and Birchsplash, but soon she went to her daughter and covered her ears with licks, which Heronclaw quickly covered with his own tongue.

"Welcome back." Dawnstar appeared from the throng of cats that had started to gather to see the cats returning from the journey. "I hope you found something worth the journey?"

"We think so, Dawnstar," Emberheart meowed, looking at the cats who had gone on the journey with her. Hazelfur, her bravery and energy never-ending; Birchsplash, always brightening the spirit of the cats around him; Rowanpaw, bad-tempered but still willing to do anything to help his Clan. They were all her family.

But then, the proud moment was ruined.

"Primrose--Get back here!" Aspenheart's voice called from outside the camp. The BatClan members all looked up in surprise and looked ready to fight. Then, tiny Primrose appeared over the side of the camp entrance. Her eyes glowed in shock as she saw all the cats before her, then she spotted Rowanpaw and raced over.

"I hate her!" she cried, racing to the young tom and hiding under his legs. "She keeps trying to tell me what to do!"

Before Rowanpaw could reply, Dawnstar thrust herself forward. "What's going on?" she asked, not sounding happy nor angry. "Why is there a loner kit in my camp hanging on one of my apprentices?" She looked over at Emberheart.

Before she could answer, Fern and Meadow pulled themselves onto the camp wall. Fern mewled in shock and almost fell backward back to the ground, but she was helped to stay where she was by Hickory, who was helping up Rain. Wish soon followed.

"What in StarClan?" Duskfang, Heronclaw's brother, looked at the

new cats in shock. "Did you bring loners back with her?" He looked at Birchsplash, instead of his littermate that had led them.

"They helped us in the Twoleg place," Birchsplash explained. "We were all attacked by foxes--one of their cats were killed, and all of us were injured. They wouldn't be able to survive there alone, especially with one of their she-cats expecting kits and another caring for three." He looked at the three young kits who had all gathered next to Rowanpaw.

"Is this Blazepaw?" Primrose asked bravely, sniffing at the bigger tom. "So he's our brother too, right?"

"What?" Blazepaw's eyes filled with shock.

"What does she mean by that?" Dawnstar looked at Rowanpaw with hard eyes. Just then, Aspenheart appeared with Rohan, fur brushing together.

The clearing went silent for a few moments as the Clan cats looked at the cat who had betrayed them; the cat who left her kits and Clan to die. "Aspenheart?" Dawnstar's eyes were wide. "You're alive? You have more kits?" She looked at Primrose and her sisters.

Blazepaw stared at his mother with all sorts of feelings rushing through his eyes. He finally was able to look at Rowanpaw. "We have half-siblings?" he asked softly, looking down at the three littermates.

"Full siblings," Rowanpaw replied with a growl, casting his gaze up to his so-called parents. "She was a traitor to her Clan before she even left." His tail lashed in fury.

Aspenheart's eyes laid on Blazepaw. "Blazepaw?" she whispered, stumbling down the rocks and hurrying to stand in front of all her kits. Rowanpaw stepped closer to his brother, shielding him the she-cat. Her eyes turned weak as Rohan walked up.

"*He's* our father?" Blazepaw whispered, eyes filled with hurt. He had been the first of the two brothers to wish that their father had been a brave warrior who died for his Clan. The truth seemed to burn a

hole in his heart. Rowanpaw felt another flash of anger that the two older cats had sent so much hurt into his brother in just a few quick moments.

"Why did you come back, Aspenheart?" Dawnstar, who seemed to have had lost her voice for a while, stepped forward. The old warrior turned to look at her former leader. She dropped her head in respect and submission.

"I believed my kits to have died, and the moment I found out they were alive I wanted to come back. Since the moment I left I wanted to come back... Since the moment I lost Lavenderkit..."

She seemed to expect pity, but Rowanpaw felt a fierce spark of happiness when Dawnstar, nor any of the Clan, gave her condolences. "You still left, but now you expect to be welcomed back without any trouble?"

"Not at all, Dawnstar." Aspenheart dropped her head. "I knew it would be hard to return, but I want to prove myself."

"They're all injured, we can't take them in!" Brackenfoot, the oldest warrior with his brother Brownear, jumped forward. "They have too many kits to feed, and that one can barely stand on her paws!" He looked at Rain, and Rowanpaw noticed she looked extremely tired.

"But they also have hunters," the bushy-furred black warrior Leafpelt argued. "And more future warriors." She nodded to Primrose, Fern, and Meadow. "They'll be what, four or five moons when leaf-bare comes?"

"Four," Rowanpaw confirmed before Aspenheart got the chance.

"So they're two moons now, that's four moons closer then Ashbreeze's litter. And then four more hunters, and even more kits with Emberheart's." It seemed that Sandflight had shared the news to the entire Clan, or she had overheard Heronclaw earlier.

"And Rain's," Hickory added, touching his mate's ear with his nose. "I'll hunt for her, and for Aspenheart's kits."

"As will I," Rohan added. "But I'll hunt for all of your kits as well."

He stepped forward to stand in front of Dawnstar. "You don't know me, but I've known Aspenheart for moons, and all she talks about is your Clan. I know how it works, or how it worked when she was here. I know you're starving and kits die in every litter. More warriors mean more prey to share, but it also means more prey *to* share. My cats and I grew up in the Twoleg place, surviving on tiny mice and skinny rats. We know how to trick prey, how to trap them. I know we can make you proud to call us your Clanmates, or I will take my cats and leave you to live by yourselves."

Despite his speech, Dawnstar still looked suspicious, though the tortoiseshell sisters Bloomcloud and Juniperfur seemed to agree with Leafpelt at giving the new cats a try. Brackenfoot, Brownear, and Duskfang seemed to be sticking with the decision they should leave. Heronclaw would probably go with whatever Emberheart did.

The last warrior was Clovertail. She was still with her kits, though she gave the loner cats dark looks. "I can understand helping the kits, but a traitor?" She looked at Aspenheart coldly.

"Why should I trust you?" Dawnstar asked Aspenheart, but then added with a look to all the Twoleg place cats, "why should I trust any of you? What can you truly do for my Clan?"

"I am a good hunter," Rohan meowed, "and I can fight to protect my own."

"I can and will do the same," Hickory agreed.

"I can hunt as well," Rain meowed, "and I can take care of kits for tired mothers."

"I'm good with kits as well," Wish meowed. "And I may not be too good of a fighter, but I can hunt as well as any other cat."

"I can fight," Aspenheart meowed when Dawnstar looked at her. "I may not be a good queen or the best hunter, but I can still commit to my Clan."

"And the kits?" The leader cast her gaze over to the three littermates

at Rowanpaw's legs.

"They're kits!" Aspenheart said immediately. "They can't do anything yet!"

"You're wrong," Rowanpaw cut his mother off, and all the cats looked at him. The feeling of them all expecting him to say something made him feel powerful and needed. "I played with them, and they showed skills that one day could really be used." He explained the game they had played, how they had outsmarted him by using distractions and how they came back for each other.

"Those are just games!" Brownear argued.

"Any other skills?" Dawnstar looked at them.

"Well, my little Fern will be a great hunter!" Aspenheart clearly thought Fern would need the most help of her littermates. The small she-cat looked upset at the thought of being a hunter.

"No, she wouldn't," Rowanpaw argued once again. "Fern wouldn't be a good hunter or even a good warrior. If any of you knew her you'd know she'd be a great medicine cat one day."

"Medicine cat?" Brackenfoot withdrew with a shock. "She's a loner!"

"She's half-BatClan," Leafpelt argued. "And Sandflight needs an apprentice sooner or later."

"She'd be the greatest medicine cat!" Primrose bounced forward, fur puffing. "I'll fight any cat that says different!" For a moment, Dawnstar's eyes were full of amusement, but she also seemed a little impressed.

"She's definitely a fighter," Juniperfur murmured.

"I-I can hunt, I think," Meadow added quietly.

"Oh, let them at least try, Dawnstar!" Bloomcloud meowed. "They deserve a chance!"

The tan tabby leader flexed her claws against the ground. "Alright,

fine!" She shook her head in defeat, then she turned to her entire Clan. "We will allow the newcomers to stay. If they do not prove themselves in the next moon, they will be forced to leave our territory and never return. *All* of them." She looked at Rowanpaw and down at his sisters.

Instantly, he looked over at Aspenheart. "Don't mess this up," he hissed at her, "for the sake of your kits."

Not really sure about the writing, but I just want this book to be done, and it is! Here is (hopefully) the plotline to the second book, Warriors: Clouded Skies #2 - Frost!

"After a dog attacks a group of EchoClan apprentices, one of them is left fatally injured. Uncertainty follows this accident as Acornstar's leadership is questioned, and problems arise with SageClan. Meanwhile, in BatClan, Rowanpaw faces new and old challenges with his family and his Clan, possibly with StarClan to blame."